25¢

December

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Good Stories Well Told

Beginning

"Red Paint"

By Madeleine Sharps Buchanan

A Complete Novelette

"Cherry Plummer's Christmas"

By Herbert Shaw

There is Nothing Surpising

in the fact that

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

is the magazine in which

"BEAU SABREUR"

By PERCIVAL C. WREN
Author of "Beau Geste"

first appeared under the title of "Who Rideth Alone?" This novel, of which 100,000 copies have already been sold, is published by The Frederick A. Stokes Company and is to be filmed by Famous Players-Lasky. It was MYSTERY MAGAZINE'S first serial, and the standard it set has been steadily maintained in every issue.

The January issue

is an excellent example, if only because it features

Three Distinctive Novelettes

"STEADFAST DUNES"
by HARRIS BOOGE PEAVEY

"THE FRIEND OF THE FAMILY"
by SAMUEL MORSE

"TRY YOUR LUCK"
by SINCLAIR GLUCK

None of these stories is in the least alike. But each of them is a really good story well told.

All in the JANUARY number of

At Your Newsdealers

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Price 25*c*

All life is a mystery and life itself the greatest mystery of all

ROBERT SIMPSON, EDITOR

Volume X Number 3

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Around the Corner

IT is fitting, in the December number of a magazine, to say something optimistic about the prospects for the coming year—to divulge more ambitious plans and to predict a bigger and better year than ever before. However, each succeeding year has a trick of working out its own destiny and the mystery of 1927 will not be altogether disclosed until the full twelve months have run their course.

MYSTERY MAGAZINE will tackle each of these twelve months, one at a time. It will turn its corners hopefully but deliberately, planning only to make the current number of MYSTERY a better magazine than its predecessor.

This is the only sure way to build anything that matters. It is the only plan that, conscientiously adhered to, can have any reasonable expectation of true success.

You have the December number now in your hands. We think it is an improvement over the November issue, and believe the January number is still better.

It would be both interesting and instructive to know what *you* think.

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, of MYSTERY MAGAZINE, published monthly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1926.—State of Massachusetts, County of Suffolk, ss.—Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Chester H. Smith, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Assistant to the President of the PRISCILLA COMPANY, publishers of MYSTERY MAGAZINE, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, to wit:

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3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent. or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

C. H. SMITH.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 23rd day of September, 1926. Myron C. Gates. (My commission expires Sept. 24, 1928.)

Cherry Plummer's Christmas

By HERBERT SHAW

Merry Christmas, everybody! Cherry Plummer's calling! With a twinkle and a laugh at the antics of Solly the monkey, and perhaps a bit of pensiveness at the Auld Lang Syne refrain, this delightful tale of Herbert Shaw's breathes the Christmas spirit of good-will to men in every paragraph.

THE MAN with the brown face and the good wrinkles of laughter round his eyes opened the door of the carriage before it had come to a stop at Waterloo and jumped from the boat train with the eagerness of a boy on a holiday.

As he did so a gray streak, or so it seemed, sprang from the rack and alighted on his shoulder.

"Cheer-oh, London!" said Cherry Plummer. "You keep in the crosstrees there, Solly, and hold tight, or you'll get me into trouble. Solly, you wise, wicked little devil, we're home for Christmas, and there's going to be doings! Pipe for a porter, Solly, and double to it, my son!"

Solomon, the gray monkey, looked at least a hundred years older than Cherry, and a thousand times wiser. The first word of Cherry's last sentence was enough for him.

He stretched a long arm down, pulled a whistle from his owner's breast pocket, and blew. People now hurrying from the boat train stopped. It was a nasty, piercing whistle.

Unmoved by their stares, their uncomplimentary remarks, their expressions of disgust, Solly continued to blow.

Three porters and a very official-looking man rushed up, scandalized, to stop this extra turn. The official-looking man cried, "Stop that infernal noise!"

"Full astern there!" Cherry com-

manded. Solomon stopped, and the official removed his fingers from his ears.

At that moment a middle-aged woman with a black cloche hat, hair of the color of real hairdresser's henna, and very short skirts, plucked at the official's arm.

"I want to lodge a complaint against this man," she said in an affected and angry voice. "I wish—"

"Steady your helm, ma'am," interrupted Cherry very quickly. "We're all wishing things these days. The papers tell me it's the great war was the cause of it, mum! I shouldn't like you to say anything you was sorry for afterward, like—*that* ain't going to do nobody any good!"

"Impertinence!" cried the woman with the dark red hair. "You're as bad as your wretched monkey." She turned angrily to the official.

"I suppose you're the Superintendent of this station?" she said. "Perhaps you'll tell me why this common sailor was allowed to bring his nasty little beast into a first-class carriage, to annoy ordinary passengers? It's disgraceful!"

The man was taken aback, and Cherry Plummer himself answered her question.

"It's because he had the money to pay his fare, mum—the same as you," he said gravely. "And a first-class for little Solly here, too. I've got the scads all right, all right. I've been away for a year or so, but I'm home for Christmas! Savvy?"

Solomon, the little Capuchin monkey, caressed his chin in the most dignified way and stared uninterestedly at the furious passenger, who doubled a hand that sparkled with rings and shook it in his face.

"He jumped into my lap the first minute the train started," she complained, "and this man called him back. After that, the monkey did nothing but stare at me all the way up to town. He——"

Cherry Plummer spoke politely.

"Did little Solomon here do you any harm, mum?" he inquired. "Hurt that pretty frock of yours? You're dressed like a queen, and Solly's a wise monk. He's heard of the cat they let look at a king, maybe—eh, Solly?"

And Cherry grinned in his most charming manner, but the aggrieved lady was in a bad state of nerves, and was not in the least inclined to be friendly.

In a flurried way she searched in an ornate handbag and held out a visiting card to one of the bewildered officials as importantly as if it had been one of the Crown jewels.

"I cannot waste my time here any longer," she declared haughtily, "or I shall miss my train from Paddington. I am the Honorable Mrs. Bruce Hurlingham. I decline to be insulted by this rough sailor any more. I will expect you to look into the matter. I will write to the secretary of the company. I will—O-h-h-h! Oo-o-o!"

THE Honorable Mrs. Bruce let loose a cry that was compounded, in unequal parts, of a scream and a wail and a couple of bad words.

She had replaced her thirty guinea bag on the top of a cabin trunk. Solomon, who had darted unnoticed from Cherry's shoulder, was exploring its fascinating contents, and was holding up a variety of tiny, bright-colored tubes.

Gazing at one of these with mournful longing and expectancy, he solemnly tested one by biting it—hard. A thin stream of Number 2 Daylight Rouge ascended in two places and streaked the monkey's face. Solomon shut both eyes tight and flung the tube to the ground with a scream of rage.

"Poor little chap!" Cherry consoled

him. "He thought those tubes of make-up muck were a new sort of caterpillar—he's dead nuts on caterpillars, is Solly! Are you leaving us, mum?"

He spoke to the back of the Honorable Mrs. Hurlingham, who was flouncing away at the top of her temper.

She muttered dark threats, and Cherry called—softly but still politely—after her:

"I hate myself for contradicting a lady, but it was all your fault, mum. If I had a little sister of thirteen I wouldn't let her wear a skirt as short as yours. No, mum! I wouldn't let her wear silk stockings that look just the same as if they were bare legs. I wouldn't be surprised if he wanted to *bite* 'em.

"No, mum! Next time you travel up with a Christian monkey, you dress yourself proper, and he won't stare at you. Good-night to you, mum, and a Merry Christmas!"

ONE OR two of the bystanders raised a cheer. All their sympathy was with Cherry now.

Cherry, grinning, roughly checked two huge heaps of his personal luggage, which perspiring porters had built into a kind of rampart on the platform. There were spears and a gigantic war drum and a fantastically colored idol which was so ugly that one look at it made your flesh creep.

Cherry seized a stout knob-kerry and banged the drum with a vigor which sent the reverberation of an air raid echoing terrifically under the station roof. Nine platforms away, a scared engine driver slammed the brakes hard on a train just going out for Teddington.

"Get busy with that whistle, Solly, my lad!" the sailor commanded. "Three taxis, please, and don't stare so. It makes me nervous. Two for the luggage, and one for Solly and me!

"What a Christmas! I've been away from the old town for years, and I've got scads to burn—and Solly and me are going to make London sit up and call for its mother! Forward the Buffs! Shake out that reef and let her go!"

THREE taxis rolled down the slope from the station. In the Christmas lamps and the naphtha flares of the street, stalls, Ibbetty Boo, the painted idol, greeted the world from the second taxi with a vast and clownish leer.

In the main road Cherry warmed to the lights of the bridge and the river, and the tears of the wanderer who comes home again after long exile were in his eyes. He swept off his battered sailor's cap in a gesture that was unconscious and a tribute to England's City.

"Cheer-oh! London!" he called softly. "Happy Christmas, London! Happy Christmas, everybody—Cherry Plummer calling!"

THE beautifully mannered reception clerks in the vast entrance hall of the famous Cardinal hotel are used to Dukes and Maharajahs and film stars and beauties from the stage.

The man with the unflinching blue eyes, with a solemn and unflinching gray Capuchin monkey perched on his shoulder, a monkey who every now and then blew a whistle to relieve the boredom of his life, was a problem beyond them.

"Afraid you didn't hear me, my young lord," Cherry repeated. "I want one of them regal suites I've read about. I've got the dough, and the dough's got to be done in—do you get me? I want one of them tiled bathrooms with a shower-bath. First thing in the morning I want half a pound of caterpillars for Solly here. He likes them woolly and fat. They're

out of season—but I've got the dough. He likes them in a blue basin—blue's his color—so that he can pick his own.

"Don't you hear me? Then what are you looking so goggly for. There's something funny about this pub. Solly, blow the whistle for the manager!"

Solly obeyed, mournfully.

The frightened reception clerk stuck two fingers in his beautiful high collar in a despairing and perspiring way. He withdrew his fingers and ran them down the page of the register in front of him while he scanned it very intently.

"I'm afraid there isn't a vacant room," he said, and tried to make his voice sound regretful. "No—ah—not a single room! I'm very sorry, sir!"

"Mr. Plummer to you," said Cherry. "And you're lying. You've got rooms enough for a regiment—if they all trotted along in boiled shirts. Send for Mr. Charles Anderson and tell him there's a pal wants to speak to him. Didn't you hear?"

The nobly dressed young man stood still with astonishment. His mouth was slightly open.

Six months before, the papers had been full of the marvelous romance of Mr. Charles Anderson. Arriving seemingly from nowhere, he had jumped with savings of a few hundred pounds into the rubber boom, and six weeks of astounding luck had made him a millionaire. Since then, he had kept a suite of rooms at the Cardinal.

"Mr. Anderson?" stammered the clerk.

"I call him Charles."

"But — you see, Mr. — ah, yes — Plommer, I think—Mr. Anderson—"

"I heard you the first time. Fetch him—pronto and quicker than that—or I'll keep Solly here whistling till everybody thinks it's a fire. Solly blew that whistle for six hours once without stopping. And then I went and sold all the natives on the island cottonwool at fifty hundred times the price I paid for it. I'm a business man. Fetch——"

"But—Mr. Plammer——"

"Look now," said Cherry sternly. "I'll put you right, young fellow, else you'll get muddled. I haven't seen him for a long time, but young Charles and I are the biggest pals that ever were. We've sailed together and sung songs together in the old days, and more than once we've starved together.

"I got them papers with the news of his good luck out in Mexico. They tell me he's a millionaire. And I set to it good and proper from that very second—set to it to come home and spend Christmas with young Charles. Young Charles and I will set the town alight this Christmas. He'll be so darn glad to see me there'll be no holding him.

"The papers say he's got a suite at the Cardinal. That's here, ain't it? Come along with you now, young fellow—cough him up!"

"Mr. Anderson is out of town for Christmas," the clerk informed him precisely. "He has bought Westways Manor, at Brillingdon Magna, Berkshire. He does not expect to be back here till the middle of January."

"Then why didn't you tell me that before, slowcoach?" demanded Cherry. "It'll save me having to stay in this pothouse of yours—and I didn't like your face from the start. Good-night to you!"

He went out into the courtyard. Two of the taxis had disappeared, and Cherry's luggage lay in picturesque disarray on the ground. He approached the third taxi.

"Brillingdon Magna, Berkshire," he ordered, and the driver gasped and seemed to squint at him.

"*Where*, guv'ner?"

"You heard me the first time," Cherry reproved him, and let out a wild whoop. "It's my old home—Charles and I were reared there. Turn to the left at the crossroads after the big clump of firs. Brillingdon!"

"I'm asking you——"

"Ax my foot!" said Cherry. "When I say a thing I mean it. Brillingdon!"

"It's near seventy miles!"

"It's eighty-two," contradicted Cherry calmly. "What are you doing?"

For the taxi-man was getting down from his seat. "I'm packing up," said he, "and you owe me four-and-six and twice as much again for the other cabbies for your extra packages. D'ye think I'm going to break my cab by removing all this junk into Berkshire? Try a moving van!"

"I never think," said Cherry. "But I'll not have my transport break down on me first night I come back. Taxi! Taxi! Here they are—now help these lads load up. Two taxis for the belongings, and I'll be comfortable with Solly in the front one, which is going to be yours! If you want another taxi, you can have it.

"And stop at the first good provision shop you know and get in stores. You can't see life without a ham! Long loaves and butter—not salt butter. And lay in some beer, and we'll be jolly on the road. Coming?"

"You bet I'm coming," said the grinning and converted objector, and in three minutes three taxis were driving under the archway of the scandalized Cardinal Hotel. Cherry jerked his thumb contemptuously at the outraged keeper of the swing door.

"I wouldn't take a bite in that perishing palace of yours," he declared, "if you were to give me fifty pounds a mouthful. You don't know you're alive, any of you! I'll tell you what's the matter with you: you're too perishin' posh!"

WESTWAYS MANOR looked as big as a barracks, and every room was lit up.

The fleet of taxis cast anchor with clatter and with shouting, and Solly accompanied manfully and monkerfully upon his whistle. Even Cherry, reading the log, admitted that a good passage had been accomplished.

An outraged butler opened the door under the idea that all the waits in the county of Berkshire had combined in a mass attack.

Cherry gave him a friendly how-d'ye-do and marched by him into the very middle of a most distinguished house-party, some members of which were taking their coffee and liqueurs in the great entrance hall. Solly blinked at the light and held tightly to his darling whistle.

"Fancy dress, by Jove," murmured a willowy young man with a monocle. "Priceless!"

A stately lady who was all disdain and diamonds moved from the sailor's path with an angry mutter and a malevolent look. She sensed disaster for her house-party.

Mrs. Charles Anderson had no interest in her husband's life before he had married her, but she had set her heart on social successes, and some of the best people in the country were among her guests.

Solly didn't like her looks at all.

He put out an absurd and tiny tongue at her.

Cherry Plummer pushed on and smote the broad shoulders of the new owner of Westways Manor, and grasped the new owner's hands, and pumped them up and down.

"Well, my old Charles!" he exclaimed enthusiastically, "and how are you blowing? It's fine to be looking at you once more, and to see you're doing so well, and to know that you've clicked for the goods, 'cause you were always one of the best, old Charles.

"What d'ye say? I might say I wish I had half your luck — but it couldn't have come to a better man. I'd rather wish you a Happy Christmas, Charles, old ship-mate!"

Mrs. Charles Anderson was looking daggers at her husband. Cherry didn't notice that, but he suddenly remembered his manners.

He swung around and faced the whole astounded company with a jolly grin of pleasure and kindliness which embraced them all.

"I was forgetting," he said. "I'm sure I wish you all a Happy Christmas, mates!" he announced. "Not forgetting the pretty ladies present—one and all!

"Solly here is bound to have a good time—if you can find him some nice fat caterpillars. He loves them, but it's so very hard to get them woolly enough this time of the year! A Happy Christmas to you!

"And you're lucky to know my old pal, Charles, here—let me tell you that. He's one of the best—one of the real, good best, in a way of speaking! Fine times we've had together.

"Did he ever tell you about when he and I were broke in Jamaica, and lived on nothing but bananas for a week and a half? Since then I can never look a banana in the middle! Come and sit down and have one, Charles, to make us sure we're alive!"

BUT — except Cherry himself — nobody seemed at all alive. The superior company stared at the sailor and his monkey as though they made some strange exhibit in a museum.

Cherry shivered, and exclaimed: "Golly, ain't it cold! There don't seem much warmth like in money. But who'd have thought that it'd freeze *you* up, old Charles!"

Then Charles stepped quickly to him and took his hand. There was a shame-faced look about him, but he took Cherry's hand and began haltingly, in queer whispers, to explain, under the frowning glances of magnificent Mrs. Charles and the cold stares of the others.

"It's all right, Cherry, old son—but it's kind of the wrong time, d'ye see? There aren't any monkeys in a party like this lot—they don't fit in—I——"

"And old sailor pals don't fit in, either," interrupted Cherry quickly. "Think I'm blind? You and your Number One in the diamonds and the hard-face scowl are up in the world. There's only about two hundred rooms in this pukka castle of yours—but there isn't a room—a Christmas room—for little Cherry. I can read the 'House Full' sign all right! It's up anchor and cast off for me, son. I'm going!"

"No, you're not!" Charles protested, a hand on his old friend's shoulder. "Move along with me to somewhere quiet in the house, and we'll have a yarn of the old times. Only not here—you can see that!"

"That's more like the old stuff!" exclaimed Cherry happily. "I can see——"

There was an interruption which caused the relenting Cherry to suffer a violent jar. A woman with dark red hair, a woman in very short skirts, suddenly appeared and Mrs. Charles Anderson darted toward her with a gushing smile and outstretched hands of welcome.

"My deah Mrs. Bruce Hurlingham!" she babbled. "I had given up hoping you would come."

She bleatingly added something about something being charming. But Solly, recognizing his old enemy of the train, blew on his whistle—blew a mournful mouthful of a blast that seemed somehow like the "Dead March in Saul."

Mrs. Bruce Hurlingham quivered all over her ample body, and her fine eyes registered surprise, horror, and

fear. She stretched out one arm at Cherry accusingly.

There, for a moment, she stood shaking very like the heroine in the poster of that famous film, "Never Trust A Man On Fridays."

Solly, overcome, turned deliberately around on Cherry's shoulder and showed the astonished woman his back.

Mrs. Bruce Hurlingham withdrew the accusing arm, lifted both arms above her head, shrieked, "Take that dreadful man out of my sight!" and collapsed in a bundle upon the parquet floor.

Solly, feeling her basilisk gaze removed and the sitting part of his back getting cold, turned round and obliged with another bar of the old tune. It was a little mournful, but his eyes shone suspiciously bright at the sight of the aristocrat in ruins and in tears. Mrs. Charles moved majestically to her husband's side.

"You'll ruin everything," she hissed. "If this man stays in this house another moment, I'll leave it!"

OVER the whole world, just then, thought the imaginative Cherry, there was a sound of something being torn—torn beyond repair. But still he was enjoying it—in a way—and he was certain Solly was.

He looked at Charles—the old pal with whom he had battled through so many tight scrapes. Charles was the very man to deal with such an ultimatum! You bet Charles was *so!*

There was the time Charles had flung three swindling dagoes and their six aces to a single greasy pack of cards out of a dock-side joint in Frisco!

What about that Spanish woman who had commanded the gang of hijackers outside the three-mile limit in New York Harbor—the Amazon who had come for good old Charles with a screech and a long knife in her hand? And Charles without a weapon of any kind . . . .

She hadn't come very far! Trust Charles!

Looks good to me, thought Cherry. In a couple of shakes of my monk's tail, Charles will barge this lot of spongers out of the place and we'll have it to ourselves and then there'll be doings! Attaboy, Charles, I'm neutral. I'm a guest. Christmas is coming. . . .

How about when Charles——?

Then Cherry came to earth. Evidently something about having a lot of brass and the air of Westways Manor made a man different. Took it out of him, and changed him into the tired cod family, so to speak. For all that good old Charles could do was to look beseechingly at Cherry and work his mouth up and down without saying anything. Cod stuff—second-rate cod at that—gasping on the fishmonger's slab.

"Ill, old man?" inquired Cherry kindly. Good old Charles shook his head. He managed to work out a bit of speech at last.

"'S'no use, Cherry. The missus is crazy about all this bunch. All titles and stuff. I can't get away. You see how it is!"

Cherry Plummer studies his old friend for a second, then sadly shakes his head. Is this the Charles who, with nothing but his heaving body and a stout chair he swung this way and that, fought his way through a dozen maddened Germans to safety, in a biergarten at Hamburg, just after the war?

It is not.

He is still mumbling.

"Spoken like a man," murmured Cherry ironically. "Like a waxwork man. I see how it is all right, all right. Good-night, Charles! Solly, about ship!"

HE STRODE across the hall, looking far away as a sailor looks, rolling a little as a sailor rolls. Footmen seemed scattered about on his way to the great doors; he flipped his thumb and fingers in the face of one of them. There was a heavy silence among the gilded company. There was, suddenly, a stir of astonishment.

Cherry had returned. In his arms he bore a fearsome thing, one of the seven painted idols he had brought back with him from far lands. It was hideous, evil, grinning. Cherry sailed straight down upon the magnificent Mrs. Charles and bowed low.

"I bear no malice, mum," he said kindly. "Old Charles can't help being your husband. Take this little fellow from an old friend of his, and I wish you a very Happy Christmas!"

He put it solemnly upon the floor.

Mrs. Charles Anderson screwed up her face and looked daggers at him.

Mrs. Bruce Hurlingham stupidly selected that moment to come out of her faint. She opened her eyes, and observed, shuddering, the malevolent grin of the idol. Screaming, she fainted, genuinely and completely, for the second time. And for the second time Cherry set his course for the door.

"His name's Ibbetty Boo," he called back over his shoulder, "and if you've got any sense, he'll bring good luck! Upon my Sam, this house wants it! Good-night, all!"

Cherry, like a commanding officer, surveyed his three taxi drivers filling up themselves and the time of waiting with York ham and bottled beer.

"That's good, lads," he approved. "Drive me down to the village, and I'll have a good look — see. I was born in Brillingdon—and I'll spend my Christmas in my native village and nowhere else. And keep your weather eye stirring—look for a place where I'll be welcome and won't be afraid of the bird!"

CHERRY found the welcome he craved at the general store in Brillingdon. It was also the post office.

It was long and low and quaint. It seemed just the same as he had known it when a boy. There was holly in its windows.

A bearded man with a tired face, standing near the door for a little respite from the Christmas rush, hurried out with a smile, though his eyes were unbelieving.

"It is Cherry," the sailor reassured him. "And how are you, Jim Corfield? You're not looking the lad you were. Worried like. Have you a room to spare for an old chum—because if it wouldn't worry you, I'd be glad to drop anchor for a week or so. Over Christmas, at any rate!"

"Of course, it won't worry me. Come in," Jim Corfield welcomed him. "It's great to see you!"

"Same here," said Cherry.

He followed his old friend into the shop, and round the counter into the private part of the building.

A dark-haired woman with a pleasant smile looked up, and the needlework she was busy with fell from her strong hands.

"Bless us and save us," she exclaimed, "if it isn't Cherry Plummer. Well, I never!"

"The very fellow," Cherry grinned. "I needn't ask if the world is well with you, Mrs. Milly. You look like a Christmas picture! It's years since I last clapped eyes on you. And how's the other one, the little lass I used to play with and take along to the sweetie shop when she was small? How's Miss Milly?"

THERE was a strange little silence. Cherry knew that he had quite innocently stumbled on something he had better left alone.

Mrs. Milly Corfield gave him a warning glance. Cherry fancied that from her husband, standing behind

him, there came an involuntary sound that was like a groan. He moved awkwardly, watching the woman's face for a further clue.

"Well, well," he said heartily, "your Jim's been so kind as to say he could put me up. Not that I want to be any trouble, understand. Snakes and ladders, if you knew how I'm looking forward to Christmas—just like a kid—you'd be surprised!"

He swung round at the gentle closing of the door, and saw that Jim Corfield had retreated into the shop. Through the glass half-top of the door he could see him busy with a customer. He turned again to look at the woman's face, and saw that she was crying.

"Mrs. Milly, now. I'm Cherry Plummer, just the same that was in the old days. You can talk to me if you don't mind. What's worrying you?"

He spelt it from her trembling lips rather than heard it, it was so softly uttered. "Milly."

Cherry nodded. "I've got *that*. Where is Miss Milly?"

JIM CORFIELD had married this big darling of an English country woman, so straight and fresh and sincere, with her dark hair and brown eyes and the open look of her.

But there had been a time, long back, when Cherry Plummer himself had hoped to call her sweetheart. But Jim had won her—Jim the steady and solid and successful even then—and Cherry had taken the vagabond life and gone out to adventures and the hard journeys of the sea. No life for a married man, that—not fair to *her*.

He took one of her hands and he said, almost reverently, "Don't cry. I don't like seeing you cry, Mrs. Milly. Didn't I tell you you could talk to Cherry. I'll"—he didn't know what to say for a moment, and then finished confidently—"I'll bet you one of my best idols out there that I can give you a helping hand, whatever the trouble is!"

Still silence, and still she looked at him, and there was pain in those steady eyes of hers, bravely as they always looked upon the world.

"You can trust me same as you could long days gone. I'm home for Christmas."

The word spurred her.

"There'll be no Christmas in this house for you or anybody else that you'd call Christmas," she broke out. "Milly went to London, and we can get nothing of her—hear no news. Cherry, it's breaking poor Jim's heart. It'll break mine, unless——"

Mrs. Milly seemed to gulp, she could not speak. Cherry's turn to be silent now. His look of sympathy, of friendliness, encouraged her at last.

"Unless we know what's happened to her. She's only nineteen, Cherry, and such a pretty girl.

"She would go to London. Jim was set against it from the first. She got a job at a dressmaker's, and wrote home regularly, and she was doing well.

"But we've heard not a thing from her for four months. Not a line—and all our letters have been returned. Jim went up and found she'd left the dressmaker's. Since then — nothing! Oh, Cherry, I'm afraid — and so's Jim!"

The woman moved swiftly to the mantelpiece and took down a photograph.

"Jim just looks at this every night, looks at it without a word. It's Milly in the blue frock he always liked so much. Christmas!" She said the blessed word with a kind of defiance and envy. "Jim'll go crazy if this goes on much longer!"

Cherry questioned with a word, and she shook her head.

"The police? Jim's afraid to go to

the police. He says he'll pray in church every Sunday, and no man can do better than pray. Christmas!" she laughed. "Cherry, what shall we do?"

Mrs. Corfield glanced apprehensively through the window into the shop. "I believe Jim would be savage if he knew I'd told you aught of it," she said. "There's not a neighbor knows our trouble. He wouldn't have it."

"It's all right," said Cherry. "Jim's busy out there. Have you got another photograph like this?"

"Yes, why?"

"Don't ask questions," Cherry told her. "Get it as quick as you can. Put that one back just where it was on the mantelpiece, unless you want old Jim to know you've been spilling the news to me. Wait!"

Mrs. Milly was moving to the door. She was a little scared by Cherry's promptness—by the sudden way in which he seemed to have taken command.

"What is it?"

"I want something else. I want all the letters you wrote to Milly just lately—the letters that were returned. Off you go—I'll look after Jim."

MILLY vanished, and fortunately there was no need to look after Jim. The people of the Westways were keeping him busy with demands for cards, for little extra luxuries to make good the Great Feast of Mankind, for all manner of Christmas things.

The children were plucking at the skirts of the shopping women, sturdily vociferous with their "Mums, I wants . . ."

Five minutes hadn't gone before Mrs. Milly Corfield was back in the homely parlor, and Cherry carefully stowed away the copy of the photograph of the truant Milly, and took a little bundle of letters from her hand. They were all marked "Gone away—not known."

His face expressionless, Cherry scanned the envelopes with much care. Once he lifted his head for a second, and then looked more closely still at the envelope he held.

"I thought you said something," breathed the anxious Mrs. Corfield.

"You thought wrong," answered Cherry abruptly. "I'll have to keep these."

The mother was doubtful. She shook her head. "Supposing Jim asks for them?"

"Has he asked for them before?"

"No."

"Then he won't ask for them now." Cherry held out his hand. "Good-by, Mrs. Milly."

She was alarmed again, frightened at her sense, definite and very strange, of some power beyond her knowledge in the little room.

She could not cope with Cherry—Cherry altered and more vital than she had ever known him, Cherry shining and dominant in the face of the darkness that had come upon the quiet, simple house and the quiet, toiling lives of herself and her Jim.

She could not have worded her thoughts, the thoughts that seemed to make a swirl within her. But it was as if, in the manner of a miracle, Cherry grasped hold of the terror for her daughter Milly that occupied her soul.

He grasped it with strong sailor hands. He disregarded it, standing before it with faith and without fear. The will to overcome and destroy it, the great faith and the future—these were his. And they could be hers—hers and Jim's.

Mrs. Milly leaned to that thought and that hope, and her face had light about it, and the light stayed longest and most wonderfully in her eyes.

Suddenly her thought was such that she was afraid to speak of it. Outside that glass-topped door the business of the shop went on, the life of the unseeing world. She caught

sight of bearded Jim, and he appeared as a loved figure in a dream.

Which was real, this vision of hers or the life of the shop and the post office she had known for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of days?

It was a pain to try to decide. She weakened, and caught at the table near her in an effort to keep steady. Had she been thinking for years? It was only a few seconds, and Cherry repeated, "Goodby, Mrs. Milly, I'm going."

She opened her eyes. "I thought," she said very slowly, "that I saw our Milly."

Her voice changed, there was a color of peace in it, of triumph. " I *did* see our Milly. She was all right, Cherry. She wasn't—harmed. She was—safe."

"That's the stuff," said Cherry. "Of course your Milly's all right!"

"What are you going to do?"

"Find Milly, of course. That's what I came here for, I reckon."

"You won't ask the police. Jim wouldn't have that. He's still a church-warden. It would kill him, if — He was always more religious than me—and afraid of the neighbors. It's only because——"

"And me," said Cherry. "No police, Mrs. Milly. Slip me out the other way, and tell old Jim I had to go back to London. Tell him to be sure and not to sell out all the mistletoe and the colored chains and the crackers and the like of that. I shall want a lot. I'll be back. Find a shed where my lads can dump all my gear outside. God bless you, Mrs. Milly!"

She clasped her hands. She strained to look at him. Thus she stood, without moving, for quite a while.

"Oh," she said then, "oh, Cherry, do you think you will find her?"

"Of course I'll find her," returned Cherry stoutly. "Ain't it Christmas?"

"Christmas!" The tired woman echoed it a little bitterly, still scornful, distrustful because the happiness of very many others went with that word, and she herself was desolate and unhappy. And the old wonder returned to her. "What makes you so certain, Cherry?"

"Of course I'll find her," asserted Cherry once more. "Who's going to stop me? Not God, Mrs. Milly. He's on our side—yours and Miss Milly's and mine! What's a little place like London to Him? It's just because it's Christmas that I'm dead certain sure to find her! See?"

She did not answer. But she continued to look steadily at him, and now the old gallantry was fully returned to her eyes.

"Just you leave it to me, Mrs. Milly," said Cherry confidently. "Leave it to me—I can't go wrong! Come along, Solly. We must get aboard. There's something I forgot, Mrs. Milly. Write another letter to your Milly. Never mind whether it comes back. Write her first thing in the morning. Don't forget!"

SHE LET him out through a back door, and Cherry worked round to the village street. He straightened his shoulders, and once again faced his taxi transport. The personnel, still enthusiastic, was busy to the bone with the York ham and the last of the bottled beer.

"Out cargo!" commanded Cherry. "I'll make the tally. We'll travel light this journey."

He superintended the unloading of the idols and the rest, and looked wistfully down the village street. The Goat and Compasses was just at the bend, and its lights were warm, and of old he knew the joy of its paneled bar. It would have to wait. There were six days yet before the twenty-fifth. Plenty of time.

"It's a long way to Christmas," declared Cherry wearily, "but my heart's right there!" He grinned at

the ugly brother, and smirked at the uglier sister, of the vanished Ibbetty Boo. Solly put out a paw and touched his cheek. He, too, found the peace of Brillingdon Magna hard to leave.

CHERRY did not trouble the magnificence of the Cardinal again. He took a room on the second floor of a ramshackle house in a dingy Soho street.

At the corner there was a shop called Priscilla's, a women's shop with "Robes and Costumes" and three hats in the window. It was a decent and attractive place, and the boot shop and fruiterers that were its neighbors were attractive also. But then the street seemed to begin to die, deteriorating into sullen lodging houses, and cut here and there by ancient passages into forgotten stable-yards trying unsuccessfully to call themselves garages.

Priscilla's—Robes and Costumes—was the place where the last had been heard of Miss Milly, the address from which the letters from Brillingdon Magna always came back now, marked "Gone away—not known."

Cherry watched Priscilla's, and comforted Solly, and counted the oranges and flowers that were jolly and bright in the dismal street, and waited with interest for the postman.

A day passed while he sat at his window, and night came to make the street more dismal yet, and Cherry thought with envy of the clean inn at the bend of the main street of Brillingdon Magna, and with sympathy of the horrid state of bondage of his old pal who had become too rich, poor old son—Mr. Charles Anderson now of Westways Manor, Berkshire—old Charles that was in the days of penury and freedom.

Another day came, and passed slowly toward its mean night in this frowsy street.

Down there, at Priscilla's, Robes and Costumes, the postman came. He went on with his heavy burden of Christmas letters, and although Priscilla's was keeping open late this Christmas week, a girl came bareheaded out of the shop and went up the street, and Cherry saw a letter in her hand. He put Solly down. He was up and at the front door of his lodgings within a minute.

"That'll be Miss Milly's pal," he murmured. "I knew I was right!"

IN THE Trafalgar Lounge an automatic piano made dreary music. In the plush chairs that stood about were half a dozen men, and nearly a score of girls in bright dresses and with eyes bright or sullen, but always watchful.

One or two of them had loud voices, and all of them were very red-lipped. Like them the holly and mistletoe, hung here and there and stuck behind the frames of whisky advertisements, looked uneasy and unhappy.

The Trafalgar Lounge was a place that fitted the dingiest end of the Soho street. There was one tired waiter.

The girl who served drinks behind the bar across the corner of the room was also unhappy in her eyes. But she was different from the place, she was alien. She was not of the kind of the other girls.

She was very pretty and she was not painted, but she was unsmiling. She did not smile when the shabby waiter filled orders on his tray. She gave him the drinks he wanted, and then stood still. She might perhaps have been thinking about Christmas.

She did not smile when Cherry approached the bar and asked for a drink.

Cherry said, kindly, "You're a naughty girl, Miss Milly," and the girl seemed to stiffen. Her eyes grew big, and in them Cherry saw something of the terror he had seen in the

eyes of Mrs. Milly. And he saw the girl's lips tremble. He said quickly, and very gladly:

"No, you're not—I can see that. You're only a very stupid girl, Miss Milly. Do you know they're waiting for you down at Brillingdon Magna. They wait for you every time they put the shutters up and light the lamp."

"I don't know what you mean. I——" she began, and stopped, for Cherry obviously did not hear her.

"Of course you know they're waiting for you," he said. "Because you opened all the letters they sent you—I spotted that at once. You couldn't do without opening and reading them, God bless you for that. And your pal at the shop where you used to be brings them along to you first pop they come. You've got one now, longing for a chance to read it.

"There's a train at eight-twenty, Miss Milly, and you're coming back with me! Tell me anything you want to—Mrs. Milly, your mother, and I are old pals!"

SHE nodded. And now her eyes were different, different and beautiful as Mrs. Milly's eyes had been, in that moment of vision in the parlor behind the shop.

"I got sacked from Priscilla's," she said slowly. "There was some money missing, and I didn't take it, but I was afraid. And this was the only job I could get. I didn't dare let father know I was here. In this place! You don't know father—I didn't dare! I don't dare tell him if I go back even now. But there hasn't been anything wrong. I'll swear there hasn't!"

"I knew that," said Cherry. "Eight o'clock will do for that train. I'll wait till you give me the office you can slip out. The other thing's all right. You had an accident, and you've been in the hospital—and they wouldn't let you write or anything at all. We can fix that up on the way down. We'll be back home before eleven."

THERE were great doings at Jim Corfield's. Miss Milly had come home. You couldn't see the ceiling hardly for strips of colored paper, crossed and recrossed, you couldn't hear yourself speak for the laughter of the children Cherry had collected—from end to end of the village—at the quaintness and wisdom of Solly. Or for Solly's whistle.

You couldn't think of eating any more for the vastnesses of the turkey and the sauce and the pudding, the ruby wine and cider and the almonds and the Brazils and the oranges and the dates.

Mrs. Milly couldn't think of anything except the smile of bearded Jim and the beating of her heart and the general wonderfulness of Cherry, and how happy and pretty Miss Milly looked in a blue frock.

Solly was made to stop blowing his whistle at a moment when you just couldn't laugh at him any more. And there was a loud knocking.

Cherry opened the door, and in the light of the lamp his face seemed a little hard. The visitor's fur coat was worth—well, even more than that.

"Cherry, old son," said Mr. Charles Anderson of Westways Manor, Berkshire. "I'm sorry as hell for you know what, and how goes it?"

"Fine," said Cherry glumly, and stared harder still.

"Cherry, old man," said Mr. Charles Anderson, rubber magnate and millionaire, of Westways Manor, Berkshire, "how are things blowing these days? Cherry, old pal, I'd like to give you a slosher of a present for Christmas, if I only knew what you liked.

"Cherry, old cock, my barrack up there is full to the knocker of a lot of

squirts with la-di-das for good honest swear words and a picked bunch of wenches with no skirts and no hair and no chests worth the speaking of. They ought to be mashed flat and counted out and served on a grill to Gog and Magog, who would then call the waiters and demand same to be taken away and something to eat.

"I'm fed to the top of my ears with them. I thought I'd pay you a call, like, Cherry, old horse."

"It's a cold night," remarked Cherry, informatively.

"Cherry, old top," said the same strong man, "in my pocket I've a gold cigarette case that some pirate charged me thirty-five guineas for in Bond Street. I'd like you to have it, I would that. It looks damn pretty, and I bought it for you yesterday."

"I smoke my fags straight from the yellow packets," said Cherry, "thank you kindly. It's more convenient."

"Cherry, you dirty dog," sermonized the fur-coated piece of refuse and flotsam from the chill winter night, "I hope to Sam you'll catch double pneumonia and gall in all your livers, standing there in the icy draught, you bitter-hearted, foul-tongued, unchristian pig!

"May your boots let in the rain, you talkative lump of ill-doing and unheartedness and general misbehavior, and may your rabbits die! May that insect of a misbegotten monkey of yours—ah, that reminds me!"

From the opulent fur-bearing district surrounding his pampered body, Mr. Charles Anderson drew forth, with a swear and a grunt, a round tin that had once contained cocoa.

"Cherry, old mate, there was a thing you said I couldn't forget, and didn't try to. Oh, I got busy. I sent the head gardener up to town in the second Rolls and a howling temper—he'd never heard of such. Seems I ought to have sent the pantry boy for 'em.

"This tin what you see in my hand, Cherry, old smacker, is cram-jam full of the wooliest, wooziest caterpillars that ever woozed and woolled. Who said you couldn't get Christmas caterpillars? Fat? Juicy? Lift the lid and have a look—see—mind, now, they're a restive lot!"

"Caterpillars?" demanded Cherry eagerly, and leaned earnestly forward. "For Solly? Charles, old pal, come right in! The lodge is tiled and the house is full!"

Zarobi

By LESLIE GORDON BARNARD

MY FRIEND Edwards was sitting on a park bench under the shadow of the gray prison wall when it happened. The park was only a strip of green grass, a flagged walk, a row of poplars and a nondescript bed or two of flowers.

Visitors to the place of correction entered and left this way.

Edwards had come with Doctor Canning, who had business within, and was waiting for him.

At one side of this strip of cultivation ran a high gray wall; on the other, flanked alternately by grass and by a patch or two of bright sand, ran the river.

At one end the strip stopped at the street, at the other it led into the main entrance of the gray building which then, like a medieval castle, paralleled the river and was washed at the base by it.

High up in the gray wall of the building were many barred windows; one could imagine prisoners looking longingly down upon the quiet but swift running waters.

Once or twice prisoners had managed to saw through the bars. There had been a newspaper stir over these suicides, letters had been written to the editor, but the thing had died down.

On one of these curious patches of sand, white under the sun as diamond dust, was a bench. It was this bench that my friend Edwards chose to sit upon, having a liking for a sun-bath.

Once or twice he gazed up at the windows at the corner of the building, high-up, reflecting on what it must mean to be condemned for life! As he looked, it being the noon hour, and the prisoners idle, perhaps, he saw a figure in a corner cell behind the bars, staring down.

Edwards, meeting his eyes, withdrew his own glance, feeling it scarcely decent to look upon this caged fellow-being. He started digging idly in the sand with the end of his cane and watching the swift, silent onrush of the river.

It was then that a man came and sat on the other end of the bench. He was wearing a gray suit; his

features were pinched and sharp, his eyes piercing, but beyond that Edwards could not afterward describe him.

This man, after a moment of hesitation, coughed and said:

SAND and water! They go pleasantly together. When I was a child, sir, I used to play in the sand by the side of a creek that ran near my home. The water was clear, clear; the white sand showed through it; we used to lie flat on our little bellies and drink it—cold and clear it was!

Well, I will not bother you with that, though there are times when one's boyhood seems so vivid the nearer things grow vague. That was sand—and water.

Perhaps, sir, you do not know what sand is—without water? I see you do not. For that you should thank God.

You have heard, of course, of the Zarobi Desert? Well, it matters not—you will, of course, when the films are exhibited. These films were taken by the Zarobi Desert Expedition. They will show to the world the astounding things that happen in a world of sand, where by day the burning underfoot blisters the soles, and by night the cold seems, by comparison, intense—and both of them are dry, dry as ashes, with no moisture at all.

Men's bodies, as you know, sir, are mostly water; even the enamel of the teeth has a large percentage of it. It is a bad thing to take such bodies across the Zarobi Desert. I am one of those whose bodies went across.

There is a single river cuts through its western end; very like our river here, sir. You see the way the rocks are used there to hold the water back—that parapet?

Well, so it is there, only on a gigantic scale, great granite blocks on either side forming huge canyons, as if the One who made the river was jealous of the desert and would not let even a tiny drop seep through, but kept it rushing by to water lands that already are moist, and pour its volume at last into the sea, wasted.

I doubt if a single blade draws moisture from it as it dashes by in its granite channel. Sometimes when the wind is blowing across the arid wastes, the sand beats like surf against the rocks, only to fall in dusty spray and be lost in the rush of waters.

You don't know, of course, what it is like to be in a sand blizzard?

The initial lap of the journey, from the last fringe of green that reached out stragglingly and lay panting and exhausted on the edge of the desert, until we got to the granite river, was a journey for us of seven days. And for the last three days the wind blew continuously.

You have been in a winter blizzard, of course, when the pellets of snow come stingingly on a persistent wind. Think of those snow pellets as sand, diamond-dust sand, cutting viciously at the face, getting in the eyes, powdering into the nostrils and throat.

Think of the wind not as ordinarily cold, but as a breath from a blast furnace by day and marrow-piercing by night, and always that gusty swirl enveloping you, and frightening your pack-horses, and getting in your food so you ate more sand than anything.

BRANDLISS was leading us, and if you had known Brandiss you would know what a devil he was. Especially to three of us: Drobie, Curtis and myself.

The rest, you see, were experts of one kind or another, leaders in a sense, but we three were there to do the dirty work, the mean jobs.

I suppose if you were scientifically inclined you'd not mind the suffocat-

ing, gusty, sand-filled wind, and the sting of it; but we were ordinary men, we three, and we were heading due into the storm, and it was devilish.

We kicked at last. I suppose that was wrong, when we'd agreed to go with the expedition, but you've no idea what it meant, plunging on, gaspingly, and the sand drifting and sucking the breath from you.

"Better go back," we told Brandliss, "and wait for favorable weather."

Well, there was all the rest of the scientific johnnies sitting about, for it was night, and we had made camp of a sort under the lee of some immense dunes.

I remember the night was like a blue bowl inverted over us, a bowl of blue glass fitting closely so there wasn't any air to breathe when the sand got swirling inside.

And the stars looked so big and so near, they seemed like the eyes of the gods winking mockingly at us, pressed close to the blue glass watching our feeble struggles. And when Drobie and Curtis and I spoke up that way, we could see we had all but Swanson with us.

Swanson was a great barge of a man with the placidity and the hair of a Scandinavian, the eyes and voice of an Englishman, and the briskness, when occasion demanded, of an American. Which he was I don't know.

Swanson said, "No; we better push on to the river; it couldn't be far away now."

But the others, we could see, sided with us; you'll think us cowards, but then you weren't there to feel that it would mean everything worth living for to turn our backs on that awful wind, and sweep back with it to where there were green things and shelter against the choking drift of sand.

Brandliss, of course, had no temper for a job like this; he fired right up —but he saw, I suppose, we were getting out of hand.

There was our last small puncheon of water, unstrapped from the back of the animal who carried it, standing nearby. Brandliss eyed it quickly.

"Thirty-six hours more to the river!" he said. "Six days to return to our starting point!"

"Three," we told him, "with the wind with us."

"You cowards!" he cried. His eyes were flashing. Suddenly he gave a spring toward the puncheon, and, pulling out the bung, kicked it rolling down the slope of the sand, its precious cargo spilling uselessly, a thin trail of moisture, clear under the intense starlight, but instantly drifted over. "Now," cried Brandliss, "now, I think we go forward to the river—unless anyone has a fancy to perish of thirst in the sand!"

THEY took pictures of the river. That was part of the plan, of course. Swanson and his operator would go off by day, grinding their machine on its tripod, taking the place from every angle; and at night one of the others would develop a bit to see they had it right.

It was queer to see the silver screen set up, and the river and ourselves, clear as you please, upon it.

Clear? Ah, the river was that! Clear and cold like crystal. While the scientific folk were working back up river, tapping the rocks, taking pictures and what not, Drobie and Curtis and I would be left to stand by the camp and the animals.

Sand—and water! They go pleasantly together, sir. We'd sit and puddle our feet in quiet pools made deep and curiously green by shadowing rocks; we'd lie flat on great slabs of rocks or patches of drifted sand, and drink where it ran boiling and bubbling by.

And for hours we'd sit and watch one place where the eddies and currents all merged into a great sucking whirlpool.

In the very centre was a vacillating greenish mouth formed by the twist of the water into greedy sucking lips alternately opening, closing, opening, closing. It wasn't pretty to look at, but we couldn't get away from it.

It seemed to be always inviting us to throw things to feed it. We'd like to have tossed a great log in and watched it seized, engulfed—but there was nothing of the kind about, only a few scrubby bushes whose tiny branches were too small, for the watery mouth was a good foot in diameter, we figured.

We were to remain here three days, and then push on across the desert. And on the morning of the third day Brandliss fell on a rock and strained his leg muscles, and stayed behind with us, while the others went, as usual, up the river.

Can you explain to me, sir, why people do things? The kind of things, I mean, that get into the headlines of the papers. A man, apparently decent, steady-going, running amuck and killing perhaps the very thing he loves? Or the thing he hates?

Well, I used to wonder. I can't explain it now. I've sometimes thought of it as a grown-up edition of what I suppose every child has felt who's gone to church or to some place where the music or the speaker was solemn and subdued, and you could hear a pin drop.

You've felt it, of course, sir—that thing inside your head saying: "What if I got up —now—this minute—and shouted something at the top of my voice? What would happen? What would people do, and say? What would the speaker or the musician do?" And the quieter the atmosphere the more diabolical the temptation to throw a stone into the still pool.

Maybe it's something of that. And maybe it's something else — some horrible, obscene thing living down in the depths of a man—half-witted almost, a lurking beast.

Well, anyway, there was that greedy mouth of water opening and closing its lips. And here was Brandliss left with us, and spending his time taunting us as cowards, sticking into us every jibe that his devilish wit could fashion and sharpen and barb.

And there was no log about to throw—just to see what the mouth would do with it. And Brandliss, as if he knew—as if he knew and dared us, cowards, to do it—sat on the edge of a black, slippery rock, jeering at us.

I do not offer it in extenuation for the one who did it, but that kind of thing fiddles to the madness in men and bids it dance.

I SHALL not linger over it, sir. Suffice that at evening the others returned. A blood-red sun, set against the rim of that world of sand, was turning the white dusty distance crimson. The granite walls of the river were ruby and ebony and jade.

Three black dots on the expanse, three ants on a sand heap, we were preparing the evening meal—Drobie, Curtis and I—when they came.

"Where's Brandliss?" asked Swanson at last, missing him.

We looked at each other, as the brothers of Joseph at the question of their father, but we had neither many-colored coat to show nor any explanation, save that he had been last seen down on the rocks.

Swanson grunted, and left without a word. And then we heard him calling, and none of us dared stay behind.

The river was ruby and amethyst and pearl and jade, set in ebony. But

part of the ebony setting seemed loose. It was caught in a great circular sweep of jade, bobbing up, sucked down, bobbing up, sucked down. The green lips opening, closing.

The bobbing ebony was the dark head of Brandliss.

Swanson turned after a moment and swept the faces of the three of us who had remained behind, Drobie and Curtis and I. That glance I cannot describe, except that had this been the desert about Gizeh we might have been gazing at the Sphinx. Unutterable assurance, ironical calm, inexorable insight—these were there.

Swanson said, slowly: "One of you did this!"

How did he know that? Not three—but one. One of us had done it, but which one it was two out of the three did not know.

YOU HAVE read, of course, of deserts; you have probably seen descriptions. I know only the Zarobi, but it, at least, is one that defies pouring into pictorial mould.

I have tried to paint the entrance to it, the porch—our seven days from the last of all green things to the river that runs between granite walls. Magnify that into utter immensity and you have it.

The sand grew deeper and more powdery, a white choking dust. By day the wind and sun conspired to create queer dancing pictures, lifting the powdery stuff and shooting it through and through with light.

Sometimes they took the form of beings: bright angels drifting toward the earth, the multitude of a heavenly host, until you almost held your breath waiting for them to sing the Bethlehem songs; and then, in an instant, they would be seized and twisted into grotesque dancers, a lewd and giddy chorus.

Drobie and Curtis and I all saw them, though not all the same way. As for the others, I do not know. It was forbidden that we should approach or speak to any but Swanson, and he, apart from the ordering of our duties, had only one sentence for us:

"Are you ready to confess?"

And we would look at each other, and say nothing. For the innocent ones knew only that they had not done for Brandliss, and did not know which of the other two was guilty. And our tongues clove to the roofs of our mouths. For we had had nothing to drink since we left the river.

Often since I have recalled, with a terrible vividness, that look on Swanson's face as he gave sentence that night by the river:

"No water until the guilty one confesses."

I see you do not understand, sir. That is—not fully. The horror in your eyes is not deep enough for this thing.

Imagine, if you can, that morning after Brandliss' death, when we set out in a pale white dawn into the desert. Already we were thirsty with the night, and the order was out to drink well before we started.

But that was not for us. Drobie, Curtis and I were kept just above, on a rock, where we could see the others drinking. The waters were crystal under the whiteness of the dawn.

Men scooped them up in cups or pans from deep, clear pools or, lying on their bellies on the sand, buried their faces in the cold foam where the stream ran fast.

As the horizon lurched down to the sun the waters crimsoned into wine, and men dipped it up in their cups, ruby liquid running over, pledging each other and the success of the desert trip, drinking deeply. And we three stood there, condemned only to watch.

I think Swanson fancied we would give in—or one of us who alone could tell — right then and there, and be done with it. But we looked at each other, and our tongues grew big in our mouths, but we were silent.

You must not ask me to measure time, sir, in this part of our desert trip. Whether it was two days or two hundred, I can scarcely tell; each hour stretched out in endless torture.

Perhaps because of this we saw the dancing images above the waste of sand, by day. And at night a strange dry mist came down, dancing, shimmering again, like the spears of the northern Aurora, and its streaming veils, as if indeed it might be electrical, prickling our poor swollen tongues like the feel of a dry sponge.

And the hummocks of sand—gigantic things, age-old drifts, seemed to lift themselves and move about, like pre-historic beasts, wagging their heads at us — at Drobie and Curtis and me—as if to say: "We too did not drink, and look at us—sand, just sand!"

And every night, as every day, the sky was cloudless, stretched so tight from horizon to horizon one fancied it must crack, and began to wish it would.

It pressed down, that sky, like an inverted bowl of glass over a plate, brilliant blue by day—deep, terrible blue by night; and at dawn and evening shimmering with a thousand lights and shades. But there was no air under it to breathe—for Drobie, and Curtis and me.

WE KEPT together for a while, we three, comrades in affliction. And then, sullenly, we began to retreat into ourselves. Our place, by Swanson's orders, was at the rear—three plodding figures, swallowing—though that is not the word, for we had no power left to swallow—the dust of this desert caravan.

Almost arm-in-arm we went at first, and then the change came. You would see us apart, each plodding his own way, and Curtis, who was just a boy, beginning to lag away behind.

"As soon as one confesses, all will drink!"

So Swanson put it; and that was the wedge between us. Any could give all drink! And each one waited for the other to do the thing. What did guilt or otherwise matter now?

I can only give you my own feelings, sir, but a queer, irrational anger grew in me, for I am quick-tempered in any case, and I began to hate these two who, by a word, could release us from our sufferings. It never struck me that they might feel so toward me.

And then, that night—which night it was I cannot tell—when they stopped for an hour or two to eat—we traveled mostly by night to escape the burning of the day — we three stragglers, Drobie and Curtis and I, came up to find the silver screen propped up.

"Sit down," said Swanson grimly. "The first performance is about to begin!"

Our legs gave easily under us, and there we sat. And the flickering light steadied into pictures. And there was the river, sir, the river, tumbling joyously through the rocks.

You won't understand it, sir, but they weren't just pictures to us. It was the river—the river! Down it cascaded to our very feet, until I swear we could feel its coolness bathing our blistered feet, outthrust in the burning sand.

Curtis broke first. He gave a strangled kind of cry, and we saw him plunge forward scooping up with his hands. And there were Drobie and I, after him, scrambling madly, scooping up, scooping up — handfuls of sand!

I suppose it must have looked

funny, but nobody laughed. Tense, awed, the circle watched this thing. Out of an awful silence came Swanson's inexorable voice:

"Water to all if the guilty one confesses!"

For a moment there was only the gentle hiss of sand, blown by a vagrant breeze across our feet and up against that pictured river.

Then young Curtis cried aloud, and the words sounded like the rending of cotton:

"I did it! I did it! For God's sake, water!"

DROBIE and I stood before the leader, Swanson. He led us apart to where two of the company were jealously guarding a precious puncheon of water. Swanson dismissed them. We were alone with him, sheltered from sight by a tremendous dune that towered high above us.

Swanson had two flasks; he partially filled each. We stood like two hungry dogs, ready to pounce. But because it was Swanson we waited somehow.

"Mustn't drink too much at first, and in any event we must be careful of our supply," he said. We edged forward, eyeing the precious fluid.

"Just a minute," he said. "You've not heard young Curtis's sentence?"

We shook our heads. And then he told us. Young Curtis, without water, was to be sent out into the desert alone!

Drobie contrived to speak:

"You—promised him water!"

"I did. He has had a mouthful!"

"You—devil!" said Drobie.

Swanson bowed, a smile twitching his lips.

"Are you not going to drink?" He pushed forward the two flasks. We caught at them. Oh, the coolness of the feel of them to the fingers, a moistness, almost a rime, upon the outside!

But you cannot understand. No one could understand. Curtis? Who was young Curtis? What of him? Here was water, cold and clear, to drink!

I caught up my flask, lifted it to my lips, letting the precious fluid touch my tongue, my throat. God! Was ever water like it?

And then I heard, as from an immense distance, Swanson's voice:

"Why are you not drinking, Drobie?"

And Drobie's thick, sobbing reply: "I don't believe he did it. He's only a kid!"

"Have a drink, Drobie!" said Swanson.

Drobie lifted his flask; the feel of the moisture seemed to startle him, to make him tremble. He lifted the flask as if to drink, and suddenly he brought it down with a bang on the top of the puncheon.

"Look here, sir," he said thickly, gaspingly. "I'll take his place. I'm old, and used to the desert. He's just a kid, and I'll swear—he—didn't—kill Brandliss!"

"Then you did?"

Drobie lifted his head. His face was terrible, sir; terrible in its anguish, black with the sun and with thirst; his lips were bloated and cracked; his tongue was like that of a man with quinsy — terrible, and yet . . .

You'll think me queer, sir, and of course I wasn't right at the time after all I'd suffered, but his face seemed terrible no longer except with an awful beauty, a radiance, and I almost thought I heard him say:

"If any man thirst—if any man thirst—let him come unto Me and drink." And yet it couldn't have been Drobie, for he was silent. Just fancy, anyway, sir, for there was Swanson saying again:

"Then you did it, Drobie?"

"What does it matter? I said I would take his place!"

"What if I forbid it?"

"Then I will go with him!"

"I will prevent that, too!"

Drobie lifted his head again, took up the flask, and quivered.

"Drink!" said Swanson gently. "Drink, Drobie!"

Drobie lifted the flask. I think the water must have touched his parched tongue and aching throat, for I heard him trying to swallow. But it could only have been a drop. He lowered the flask. He tried to smile.

"It's bad—to drink—too much—at first, sir!" he said, his awful tongue choking his words. "I'll keep the rest—till later!"

He started to go, swaying as he went. Swanson caught his shoulder.

"You are to drink that here!"

Drobie's eyes alone spoke.

Swanson said, sternly: "So that was your game! You were taking it to him!"

Drobie's gaze faltered. His words presently came sobbingly: "Just a kid, sir! Just a kid!"

Swanson's voice had a gentleness such as I had never heard; a gentleness, and a triumph, and something deep, deep, that Drobie had touched.

"Drink, Drobie!' he said. "The kid's sentence is revoked! You may safely drink now!"

AND THERE was I, sir, standing clutching the flask from which I had drunk.

Swanson seemed to notice me for the first time.

"Well?" said Swanson. And then he stared at me for the longest time, and I fell to fingering the flask.

"A hard test!" said Swanson, "but only hard tests bring out the qualities of a man." His voice hardened. "Did you enjoy your water?"

He took the flask from my fingers, turned it upside-down. I had finished the last drop, greedily sucking it empty.

And then he stared at me again, and my gaze faltered and fell. And his voice, when it came, was from an immense distance.

"If you go straight you may reach the river!" he said. "Will you leave tonight, or in the morning?"

As I have said before, sir, you cannot understand. And still less now. Behind me as I went, the wind sanded my tiny tracks, like the trail of an ant over desolate dunes by the sea.

If I went straight, said Swanson; but here in my covered bowl of a world, the earth a round sand-colored plate, the sky a glass bowl shutting me in, I had no compass or guide, save the stars at night, and they, as if mocking me, became dazzling myriads, confusing my way.

And as I went, increasingly I saw the mirage of water; thinking it was the river, I would break into a run, but always the mirage retreated before me, and I would fall sobbing in the sand.

And as I lay upon my belly, I would think myself a boy again by the old creek and reach down to quaff the cool waters running clear and shallow and cool and deep, and find myself burying my face in the sand.

And I heard voices long silent, repeating half-forgotten, but now vivid phrases—always to do with water.

"And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal."

"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures"—not sand, but green, green and lush and moist; that ran often in my mind, and still more often: "He leadeth me beside the still waters!"

And then I would think of Drobie. If Drobie were here, he would lead me to—green pastures and still waters.

There was something, too, I could not quite make out.

"A cup of cold water! A cup of cold water!"

I could see the cup, one my mother used to keep in the kitchen close by the door for any wayfarers who came our dusty way, and she would have me run and fetch them a cupful from the well—rimed with frost—a cup of cold water. Only it was mixed up now, always, with Drobie.

But when I reached out for Drobie, as if he were beside me, I would totter, and fall, and there would be only sand in my embrace. And I understood, in some dim way, that his spirit was not in me, that I had kept him out—that I could not have him lead me to green pastures and still waters, that I could not take of his cup. . . .

And then, when the desert had become only a dazzling arid waste by day, through which I staggered helplessly, and a blue-lit plain of heaving, titanic monsters by night, suddenly the river was before me!

I ran, weak as I was, and it seemed that Drobie was beckoning me, beckoning me, and as I came near the granite rocks were flashing with precious stones, the sanded channels were gold, and on the arid wastes at either side trees had sprung up, green, bearing fruit.

And a voice—and still, curiously, I fancied it was Drobie's — seemed to cry urgently in my ear: "He that is athirst, let him come and drink!"

And I ran, sir, forgetting everything but that, and staggered toward the cool, welcoming waters. . . .

MY FRIEND Edwards, sitting on his bench, on the strip of sand by the river that ran under the gray wall of the prison, tells me that the voice of the man who told him this ceased; but he, listening, was too rapt to move, or look, or bid him go on with his tale. Edwards sat there and the reality of the story was greater than that of the sand at which he stared, or the river lapping at the parapet below.

But when the voice did not continue, after a space Edwards looked up. The bench was empty save for himself. The man had gone.

Now my friend Edwards was annoyed at this, wishing to hear the end of the tale. At last, remembering that there was an encyclopedia in the prison library, he entered and asked to see it.

"Zarobi Desert" — no such name there. He looked under "Zarobi" and again under "Desert." He consulted an Atlas next, but no such arid waste appeared on any map that he could find.

Finally he telephoned a friend, a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, who knew all the ends of the earth. He had never heard of such a desert, much less of a scientific expedition to it.

Edwards went out again. The strip of park was empty save for a gardener whom he had noticed before sweeping leaves from the grass. He approached this man.

"Excuse me," said Edwards, "but did you notice where that chap went?"

The man straightened himself, scratching his head.

"What chap, sir?"

"That was sitting beside me on the bench a little while ago."

Edwards says the man gave him a queer look.

"Why, sir, there was just you, yourself there. I was here right along, and there was nobody there but you!"

Edwards moved away feeling a queer little prickling of his scalp. He could not have dreamed it, for he had been wide awake all the time. He remembered toying in the sand with his cane as the man spoke.

He was glad when Doctor Canning

came out, and determined to say nothing of his experience. But the doctor's face held an unusual expression. As they went along, he stopped Edwards, catching his arm, pointing up to the building.

"See that window there—the corner cell high up?"

EDWARDS saw that it was the one from which the man, from returning whose glance he had turned sympathetically away, had looked down upon him as he sat there on the park bench on the strip of sand by the water.

"Fellow in for life," said Canning. "Seems he had two chums — they'd been up to a movie show and were going home in a motor boat down the river here; got into some kind of a row—one of 'em drowned. Looked bad for the other friend, who nearly went to the gallows for it.

"All the time this chap had done it, and at the very last something came up and trapped him, so his friend got off. Even after that the friend worked to save this coward's neck."

Edwards said then, in a queer voice: "Don't blame him too much. You never know the — depths in a man—queer, horrible depths—and the pressure of—thirst!"

"Of what?"

"Nothing!" said Edwards abruptly, recalling himself.

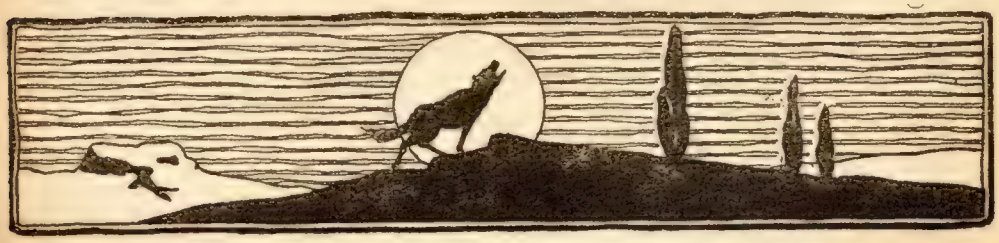
"Funny," said the doctor, "I thought you said thirst! This chap's been on a thirst strike for days. Got the idea that as the prison water comes from the river in which the—man was drowned he couldn't drink any.

"For the sake of discipline they let him go on with it. They intended giving him something else tonight."

Doctor Canning's face was queer again. He pointed up. "See the window I showed you before? Well, his cell's about the only one with two windows. The other is on the river side, a sheer drop down."

"I should like to go up and see him!" said Edwards with sudden impulse.

"A little late, my friend!" returned the doctor brusquely. "The fellow got possession of a file somewhere. Worked the bars out. Squeezed through. Crazy with thirst, I fancy. Not ten minutes ago! He plunged head first into the river!"



Red Paint

By
MADELEINE
SHARPS
BUCHANAN

"Painting the town red" is merely a collegiate achievement; a rather ordinary event that was passe when Semiramis devised the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. But when the town decides to turn the tables and paint its population a vivid red hue—well, that's different. And it is not the only thing that is different about this crisp three-part story by Madeleine Sharps Buchanan. Among other things there is the eminently human portrait of an ambitious but rather vacillating young man—the kind of young man you meet around the corner every day. And about him plays the motif of light gleaming on colored glass beads, of dark hair and blonde curls, of auctions and contests and—red paint!

CHAPTER I

THE VASE

JOHN HORNBY salesman in the bookstore that bore the name of the largest Spray City hotel, could not resist the impulse to leave his post and step into Samuel Boldinski's, next-door.

Boldinski ran the most expensive and the most largely attended auctions in the seaside resort, but it was not the impending auction that caused Hornby to forsake his job temporarily and lounge in the entrance of the handsome Boldinski store.

From where he stood the boardwalk, the ocean and one of the glittering piers that ran out to the hastening waves like jeweled arms of the land, were plainly visible; and Spray City was capable of stirring the romance in a young man of twenty-eight or so, a man like Hornby, upon that July night.

It was crowded with summer people and it was doing a thriving business, for a resort that was not so old.

But John Hornby was not feeling romantic, neither was he admiring the scene that met his eyes between the two magnificent rugs that hung on either side of the store entrance. The moonlit ocean, the lighted piers, the sound of the jazz band in the real-estate hall on the other side of Bol-

dinski's store, none of that stirred him tonight. His entire soul was right there in Sam Boldinski's store and, beyond a casual glance, he paid no attention to the changing kaleidoscope on the boardwalk.

The object of John Hornby's unblinking attention was a young man who stood upon a rug-draped platform near the door, and whose business it was to bring in those strolling people on the boardwalk and induce them to bid during the auction that the Boldinski store advertised every night. This was announced in blatant red letters just over Mr. Hornby's head:

"POSITIVELY THESE PRICELESS TREASURES ALMOST GIVEN AWAY! COME IN AND BE CONVINCED! THE ONLY PLACE ON THE WALK WHERE CHANCE REIGNS SUPREME! JEWELS— RUGS— LINENS— LACES—FURS— CHINA AND GLASSWARE! AUCTION SALE TONIGHT! COME IN!!!"

VICTOR LEMONT, the young man on the rug-draped platform, was as arresting, as drawing, as that red-lettered advertisement tacked across the top of the doorway. He was quite capable of filling the store and, having filled it, of jacking up jaded and indifferent crowds until the cash rolled into Boldinski's itching palm.

Hornby, himself a slim, nondescript, mild-mannered young man, whose clothes no one ever thought of noticing, whose chin receded just a trifle, and whose nose turned up, admired, while he hated, Victor Lemont. He was just small enough to hate a man for being what he had always longed to be.

If he could only hold crowds like that, like Lemont did every night, after he had first of all accumulated them! But that was a gift. Hornby would never accomplish it. He was not born for it. That was why he was a book salesman, while Lemont held the spotlight and drew an enormous salary.

Every night as soon as Lemont's persuasive tones were heard above the hum of the jazz band in the real-estate hall, Mr. Hornby forsook his books and left the store to the other salesman. And for the past two weeks he had been fairly haunting the Boldinski store.

Hornby's fair head, his pale blue eyes, slight stoop and apologetic voice, made him as different from Victor Lemont as night is different from day.

Lemont, spruce, dark, with sleek black head and shining, brushed-back pompadour, keen eyes and pleasing voice, alertly alive in every movement, was the best possible man for the job he held, and old Sam Boldinski knew it. Lemont got business when nobody else could.

Hornby relaxed against the pillar, which was swathed in an oriental silk, and watched his rival fill the empty store. For, though he scarcely knew Lemont to nod to, he had constituted him his rival. And in Hornby's soul there had been growing for the past two weeks the keen desire to best Lemont in some way.

Chairs had been placed across the center of the floor, and Mamie Cohen was ready to walk up and down in one rich fur after another, twisting her lithe little body like a South Sea Islander, slithering about over the oriental rugs, her pretty feet and legs encased in gold slippers and stockings.

Lemont was preparing for that stunt with the military brushes. That was his own idea, brought from larger seaside resorts, Hornby guessed. Nothing was original with Lemont, but he made it seem so; he was the cleverest bluffer Hornby had ever seen.

LURED by the advertisement and Lemont's persuasive voice, their eyes caught by the magnificent rugs and

vases Boldinski so cleverly blended near the entrance of the big store, but which would never be put up at auction, the jazz band having temporarily ceased in the real estate hall next-door, a number of people straggled in.

Lemont held on high the daintily wrapped box that contained, Hornby knew, the military brushes which might be worth a dollar and a half, but he doubted it.

"Who will give me a bid for this?" he was asking with his engaging smile. "Who will bid without knowing what this box contains, merely taking my word for it that the contents are worth two dollars and a half? Who will give me fifty cents for this box? Isn't there a good sport among you?

"I can promise that the man who bids for this surprise package will want it all right. And we're giving it away, just to get you all in here so that you may see the real bargains you are missing as you stroll by on the walk. Come on, now, who will take a chance?"

A few more people stopped in the door, smiling. A man in the gathering crowd began to josh Lemont goodnaturedly. Hornby yawned. It was the same old stunt and yet he could not keep away from it. Soon the store would be filled and the sale would be on.

But there was no sense in Hornby yawning. Not in fifty years could he lure those crowds into Boldinski's store. And his brain was alertly alive to the irritating fact.

Now some fellow had jokingly paid fifty cents for the box. He gave Lemont a dollar bill, which Lemont made no attempt to change but laid, with the mysterious box, which of course everyone was curious to see opened, on the table before him.

"Now, just a minute before you are all convinced what a genuine bargain this gentleman has received," he said with uplifted hand, for no one knew better than Lemont that a crowd will draw a crowd. "I am going to give you all a chance, a cheap chance, and in the end a present. You see these little boxes?"

He laid on the table before him a dozen or more small white boxes which contained, Hornby knew, cheap little pepper and salt sets, and then he turned to his interested and amused audience, with his all-encompassing grin.

"Now, I want a ten-cent piece to lay on each of these boxes," he nodded. "Who will hand them over? Keep your eye on your own ten-cent piece. You'll get it back all right. The contents of these boxes are worth a dollar. I give you my word.

"Would we harm this tremendous business of ours by any crooked work? We certainly would not. You can see that Spray City is a booming, fully arrived summer resort. And we are booming with it. We give a fair deal. When you see what this gentleman here has purchased for only fifty cents, you will agree with me."

Ah, yes, but no one saw what the gentleman had purchased for fifty cents! And the gentleman himself kept an eye on his dollar reposing there on his box in full view. Curiosity kept those who were already there and the sight of the growing crowd drew others in from the walk.

The ten-cent pieces in the meantime were laid upon the little boxes containing the salt and pepper sets.

"Keep your eye on your own money!" Lemont's sociable voice adjured them all. "I would, in your place. I would think there must be something crooked about a place that gives stuff away. But there isn't. We just want to get you all in here and interested, so that you may stick for the big sale that follows."

That was Lemont's way. He covered his double dealings by a winning assumption of naked frankness that usually got his crowds.

And now he was handing back the ten-cent pieces, with the boxes, to the owners.

"Open them when you get home, or take a peep now," he grinned. "We don't care. You got them for nothing. Pretty and useful souvenirs. We return your money with the gift. Nothing fairer."

But he only handed back half the boxes, and the dollar bill resting on the box of military brushes still rested there. The crowd lingered to see what was in the box, and those who did not stayed to get back their own ten cents. And gradually the crowd grew, until it pressed further and further into the store. There is no better way to hold a man than to keep some of his money.

It was a nightly performance. Lemont would fill the place before the sale really got under way.

Now before he handed back the other ten-cent pieces on their little boxes, and while he apparently forgot entirely the "good sport" who had given him a dollar for the mysterious box, Lemont began to show a few articles of value and auction them off in the usual manner. The store was filled sufficiently for Mamie Cohen to slip into a squirrel coat and begin her undulating promenade.

But for Hornby the event of the evening had not as yet occurred. He waited for it, through the sales, with a kind of feverish impatience, returning now and then to the bookstore to see that all went well.

The military brushes were handed to the brave young man who had paid for them, unseen, and with them Lemont gave him back his dollar.

"Glad to shake hands with a good sport, brother," he grinned and held out his hand to the surprised gentleman. "Take them home and enjoy them."

The remaining pepper and salt boxes with their ten-cent pieces were also handed over, but if the crowd thinned, Lemont would work the stunt again. There were many packages of the military brushes behind the handsome platform where he stood. But sometimes it was not necessary to try it the second time in an evening.

The store was filled now, the business of the evening was on, and Mamie was walking in the squirrel coat which was started off at four hundred dollars.

Still the big event Hornby waited for did not come off. When the crowd was at its peak—that was the time. This, too, was Lemont's idea, and it was going great.

AH! AT last! Boldinski himself had placed the green-and-gold vase on the black-draped pedestal beside Lemont.

The round, fat sides of the vase shone as though composed of imprisoned jewels. It was a pretty thing, and yet not one of Boldinski's valuable pieces.

It was appropriate for the purpose for which it was being used. Every night for the past two weeks that vase had been brought out, and in the mornings when there was a good crowd. It was capacious and it was handsome, and it immediately challenged the eye and held it.

Now the sales had stopped. Lemont turned affectionately to the round, fat vase at his side. He touched it with a careful finger.

There was a little stir in the crowd, for everyone knew about the green-and-gold vase at Boldinski's. It was not a new idea, but it had never been tried at Spray City. And by now the vase had brought in more money than Hornby had any idea of. It had been a gold mine.

Lemont was speaking. He carefully placed the cover of the vase on the stand, dipped his slim hand into the wide mouth of the vase and drew it out filled with vari-colored beads that caught the light and dripped fire from his fingers as he dropped them back into the vase again.

Several times he did this while he talked. Then he turned the vase until it was seen that two sides of it, between the thick bands of green and gold, were transparent crystal. It became evident that the fat vase was filled to the brim with the glittering vari-colored beads, large beads of every shape.

"If any of you have been in here before," Lemont was saying, "you know all about this exquisite vase and the fortune it possibly holds for one of you. In a few days now this opportunity will have passed. The affair will be over and the cash handed out. Can any of you make three thousand dollars easier than this on the investment of only one dollar? I guess not.

"I feel sure that most of you understand this matter of the vase, but for the benefit of those who may not, I will briefly explain again.

"Inside the vase, as you can see, are these charming, sparkling beads, hundreds of them. Come up and examine it. You may see clearly through two sides. There is no trick about it. But whether there is or not, it is only a matter of guesswork. To the man or woman who guesses the number of beads in this bee-utiful vase, Mr. Boldinski will, upon Friday evening, hand over three thousand dollars in cash.

"The exact number will not be expected. Nobody will hit it. But to the one who comes nearest to the exact number of beads in this bee-utiful vase, the money will go.

"We have been selling tickets for two weeks for this contest, and the tickets will be on sale until next Friday at noon. The sale then closes. But don't wait until then because you want some time to think. Next Friday evening, at ten o'clock prompt, the money will be handed over after we ourselves have counted the beads.

"At present none of us knows, not even Mr. Boldinski, how many beads there are in this vase. Then, the money given to the lucky person, the beads will again be counted here in the presence of the public.

"Three thousand dollars for only the investment of one dollar! Can you beat this anywhere? It is a fine sporting chance, even if you lose your dollar. Come up and look at the vase. A dollar a ticket, a ticket a guess! Your guess written on your ticket and handed in to us by noon on Friday! Remember, there will be thousands of tickets. You must be prompt."

HORNBY wondered dully how many dollars Boldinski had taken in. Plenty of people bought two, five and ten tickets. The vase could be seen at any time in the presence of Boldinski or Lemont, though only for a few minutes at a time, and the ticket buyer could ask for it.

The contest was fair enough, and there were three days and a half yet. It would be a colossal thing to handle, but Hornby felt that Lemont was equal to it. He himself had a dollar chance on the vase, and he felt glad that he worked in the next store. To have the lure so close to him would have been more than he could stand. It was bad enough as it was.

Three thousand dollars! Some guy who had just handed out his dollar and given the vase the once-over would get that cash on Friday night.

Hornby moistened his dry lips. The green-and-gold vase, as the slim

manicured fingers of Lemont turned and turned it about, seemed to catch all the light in the store, all the false glitter from the boardwalk.

Hornby's whole soul clung about that vase. He wanted the money, not for any special purpose, but only because he wanted money. He had never had any. He lived in a second-rate hotel on a side street and he only made twenty-eight dollars a week in the bookstore.

People were handing their dollars to Boldinski now and his fat hands were giving out the red tickets with their numbers in bold black. Lemont was jotting down the number and name of the ticket buyer in the big book on the table beside the vase.

This was gambling, maybe! But Spray City was not so strict—not yet. Maybe five years from then Boldinski could not try his vase contest—but Hornby was not interested in the future.

Mamie Cohen, her thin body swathed in a sealskin and ermine wrap at which everybody had forgotten to look, lounged against an oriental chair and watched, her jaws working mechanically upon a wad of chewing-gum. Even three thousand dollars could not stir Mamie Cohen. She had the mind of a cow.

"Come on," rang the pleasant voice of Victor Lemont, "place your dollars, folks! Three thousand for one! Some offer, that! And the vase on exhibition at any time! All you gotta do is walk in here and ask to look at it—from a respectful distance, of course. It belongs to anybody who has a ticket.

"Come on! Step up! You'll never have another chance like this."

And the green-and-gold vase, on the black pedestal, spun about by Lemont's clever hand, seemed to wink at Hornby while he stood staring at it.

"WOULDN'T you like to know?" it taunted him until the color drained from his face and he dragged his fascinated gaze from it to the clock that hung over his head.

His mind was made up. After the book store closed he would take the plunge. Lemont himself wouldn't be above that. But here was one place where his brains would be superior to those of the man he envied.

A dollar a guess! Just for safety, he might take another ticket. He could not resist it. There might be a slip, or he might forget—or something. And so Hornby worked his way up to Boldinski and held up a crumpled dollar bill.

"I'll take another guess, Mr. Boldinski," he grinned, and as the red ticket passed into his eager hand Lemont's voice went on, silky, alluring.

"Come on now, folks! Can you find a better investment? A dollar for three thousand—a guess for a dollar! Some chance!"

CHAPTER II

INTO THE BAG

THE GREEN-and-gold vase was locked up. The handsome richly colored store of Samuel Boldinski was closed. The boardwalk, save for a few straggling, strolling couples, was becoming deserted. All the jazz bands were silent.

In the section of the walk, however, where the excursionists came in, where the cheaper stores and amusements held sway, things were still wide open. There the colored people enjoyed life, and the all-night lunchrooms did a thriving business.

Spray City was surely an arrived resort.

John Hornby, a black cloth bag hanging from his hand, hastened along through this section, glancing

from right to left. He had taken elaborate precautions against being followed since his fellow salesman and he had closed the Macey book store.

He had ridden on a bus and a trolley to reach a spot that he might have walked to, straight down the boardwalk. But he was taking no chances.

Luck had been with him, surely, or he would never have been shown the way in which he might get that three thousand dollars.

JUST opposite a pier where dancing was still going on, and next-door to a scenic railway, there was a cheap little shop where almost everything from shell jewelry to linens, sand shovels to shaving sets, was sold. A young woman was in sole attendance, and Hornby entered the store and spoke to her pleasantly.

She was a slight person with a delightfully impudent face and sparkling eyes. Her pink dress was made of a yard of material and her golden hair was bobbed.

As Hornby entered she was engaged in powdering her very small nose, and she leisurely continued the process after he stated his business.

"A flashlight? I don't think we have any, but I'll see."

Hornby knew where she would have to go to "see." He had made the same request of a young man in that same store the night before, and the young man had gone behind the curtain at the rear to look in some mysterious place.

The flashlight had been chosen simply because Hornby had not seen any on display. It was a chance, but once again chance had aided him. Only one thing had been wrong. While the young man had been behind the curtain and he had had his opportunity, he had lost his nerve.

And if the young man had been in the store again that night, he could not have entered. Only to a strange store tender could he make that same request. And luck had been with him once more.

A beatific smile grew upon Mr. Hornby's lips as the young woman completed her toilet with a dampened finger traced carefully along her hair line of eyebrow. His eyes, however, were not upon her movements.

They had been drawn, as though against his will, to the thing that had brought him there, with that black bag on his arm, the thing he did not dare buy openly.

On the shelf that ran under the counter to the left of the little store, that shelf that almost touches the floor and where articles are placed by the store-keeper and forgotten, or hauled out and sold for next to nothing, there sat in serene dustiness and neglect the object of Mr. Hornby's visit, a green-and-gold vase with transparent sides alternating with its rich bands of color, the exact duplicate in every way of that vase filled with beads that held the secret of the three thousand dollar award!

It had been quite by accident, a few days previous, that, passing on the walk and chancing to pause for a moment before that cheap little store, John Hornby's eyes had fallen upon that fat green-and-gold vase under the counter.

Again, if his mind and heart and eyes had not been filled with always the vase, and nothing but the vase, he might never have noticed it at all in its lowly position. But he had, and ever since the plan had tortured him.

However, this chance would never come to him again. He could not hope for it. Neither could he buy that vase outright. Not that its price would be too great, but that he did not wish anyone to remember that he had purchased a vase like that.

If they found the thing gone, how could they be sure who had taken it?

In all probability they would simply think the vase mislaid. And, being down there on that low shelf, it might not be missed for weeks.

WHILE the girl was behind the curtain looking for the flashlight, Hornby moved swiftly. He stooped, opened the mouth of his black bag, popped the green-and-gold vase into it, and when the young woman returned he was standing near the door, the bag, which he had filled out with tissue-paper when he entered, looking no different than it had looked before the vase was put into it.

A wad of tissue-paper, a generous lot of it, would next day be found by the person who cleaned the floor beneath that lower shelf, but who would think anything of that?

It had really been rather neat, but the most ticklish part of his work was to come, by far the most ticklish. Quite a bit of nerve and ingenuity still stood between Mr. Hornby and that three thousand dollars!

"I'm sorry," said the girl, "we have no flashlights. It's queer you hit on something we haven't got. We carry a very mixed stock. A lantern wouldn't do, would it?"

Mr. Hornby was blessed with a poor sense of humor. He blinked at the girl for a moment, but her twinkling eyes, the upward quirk of her wide tinted lips told him that she was kidding him. He felt slightly ashamed of himself when he remembered that he had her green-and-gold vase in his bag. A thief! That was what he was. But she should have it back again. Yes, sir. Mr. Hornby meant well, after he got the money out of Boldinski.

A pale grin was the best he could do for the pert young woman, and he got out of the store as fast as possible, walking rapidly down the boardwalk further into the colored section, the vase bumping against his knee.

CLEARLY before his eyes he saw the beads that showed in the crystal sides of the vase that stood nightly beside Victor Lemont on the black-draped pedestal; he saw the rain of bright gleaming drops that fell from his hands as he plunged them into the vase and played with the beads while he talked to the crowds. He knew the color and size of all of them.

At several shops that night Mr. Hornby stopped, buying — buying beads. Since spotting the vase in the cheap shop he had found several places where he could purchase beads like those in the green-and-gold vase at Boldinski's.

Up some dark street he would step and pour them into the gaping mouth of the vase, each time taking great care to replace the cover that none might be lost. Ever more and more he had to buy. The vase was insatiable. It seemed to eat the beads. They had to be duplicates of those in the Boldinski vase, so that they would fool Lemont and his employer that coming night. After that, it wouldn't matter, for they would have in their hands the original vase. Just for one night.

There was no fear of Hornby's making a mistake about the beads. There had been no especial care taken by Boldinski in choosing the ones that filled the vase. Just beads, hundreds of them—enough to reach the curved wide mouth of the vase. But the color and shape and size Hornby knew well.

He had looked at the vase dozens of times and had watched the beads dripping, dripping from Lemont's manicured fingers as he said his stuff and brought in the dollars to Boldinski.

Hornby was flushed and trembling a bit when at last he reached his

room, carrying his heavy purchase under his arm. He had stepped from the dull routine of the book shop into a deed of daring and nerve. Nerve and brains!

It was likely, too, that in all the length of the boardwalk there was no other vase like this one! Everything Boldinski had in his shop to sell was rare, old, hard to duplicate. He made his brags about that. Even though the vase was not so expensive, Hornby shrewdly guessed that in Boldinski's mind it had no twin in Spray City.

Would Boldinski figure on a man, the nondescript young clerk from the book store next-door, for instance, finding and buying, or stealing, a duplicate of that green-and-gold vase? He would not. Even if anyone went that far, Boldinski would be sure he could go no farther.

BUT Hornby had a plan. He had not haunted the Boldinski store for two weeks for nothing. In all the evenings when he had stolen to the entrance under the red-lettered advertisement of the auction, and had listened to Lemont draw in the crowds with his surprise box, hold them there with his little boxes of pepper and salt sets, and then explain the dollar tickets for the three thousand dollar chance, his brain had been forming the plan.

Ever since he had glimpsed the green-and-gold vase on that dirty lower shelf in the little shop in the cheap end of the boardwalk, his mind had been made up and his days and nights had been so many hours of torture.

Hornby knew he would never have any more respect for himself if he did not get that three thousand dollars and put one over on Lemont.

To have Lemont himself hand him that fat award! He could think of nothing else so absolutely delightful.

He placed his vase in the centre of his sagging bed and examined it thoroughly, turning up the gas jets to their limit.

As far as he could see it was the exact twin, beads and all, of the vase at Boldinski's. He defied even Lemont's keen eyes to see any difference between the two!

As Hornby undressed his gaze kept returning again and again to the green-and-gold marvel in the middle of his bed. There, unless he lost his head, were three thousand dollars!

Before he substituted the vase he had stolen for the real vase at Boldinski's, he must know how many beads his own vase contained. There might be a slip.

This was the first crooked thing John Hornby had ever done, and he swore that it should be done right. In slack hours in the book shop he passed the time by reading, and his taste ran to crook fiction and detective stories.

Unconsciously, his ambitious brain had absorbed a little of both the daring and the methods of the law breaker and the ways and means of the arm of the law. He intended now that he would run no risk.

CHAPTER III

THE PLAN

IF JOHN HORNBY had merely wanted to steal the green-and-gold vase from the Boldinski store, the thing might have been easy. If he could only have broken open a window or door or held up Lemont or Boldinski during the morning or afternoon hours when one or the other guarded the vase in the small rear room with its sombre dark hangings, while some ticket buyer gazed at it! But he dared not do any of these things.

His work was the more delicate because no one must know that the vase had been taken and another put in its place.

Also, the task would not have been so difficult if Hornby could have simply kept the original vase and left the one he had stolen in its place. But he did not have nerve enough for that. He could take no chances on Boldinski's not having the true vase when he and Lemont counted over every bead.

There might be a difference after all in those beads when each one came to be examined. There was none, so far as Hornby could tell, even when he plunged his fingers into the vase and let the beads drip through them as Lemont did. But he did not dare leave the false vase in the hands of Lemont on Friday night.

There was, therefore, no chance for Hornby to break in and get the vase, for such a deed would leave traces.

And in the morning it was removed from the safe and set up in a small rear room where the walls were hung with heavy draperies, while Lemont or Boldinski sat beside it as some ticket buyer or other examined the vase from a respectful distance.

Hornby knew that the vase remained there all day, because he had requested several times to look at it and always at a different hour.

The question was, then, whether that vase was ever left unguarded in the little rear room. There must have been moments when it was, Hornby decided. Boldinski knew there was no chance of anyone's stealing the vase to count the beads for, immediately upon missing it, he would, of course, call off the contest and return everyone's money upon the presentation of his ticket. And it was no work of a few minutes to count those beads.

Hornby had sat up for hours carefully counting the ones with which he had filled his own vase. Not a chance of his making a mistake in *that* guess, if he had bad luck and the stolen vase would have to be left in Lemont's hands for the count on Friday night.

There was no opportunity even for a sleight-of-hand man to change those two vases when once the Boldinski vase had been carried into the store. The only time, then, was when it was in that rear room.

THE NEXT morning Hornby took his vase to the book store and set the black bag that contained it far back in a corner behind some books that were never disturbed. He would have to show at the store for a while, but he was planning to get away very shortly.

Now and then when his fellow salesman was looking he put his hand to his head. Several times he sat down and once or twice he swayed and put his hand against a counter to steady himself. At last the other man, Blakely, a studious, spectacled person with a chronic sour expression, spoke impatiently:

"What ails you, Hornby?"

"I'm feeling rotten," said Hornby with a sigh of relief. He had thought the fool would never notice. "Think I will have to knock off work for this morning and go home for a while. Can you be here until this afternoon? I'll try to get back then. Think I've got a summer grip."

"Say, you've been leaving the store to me every night for glory knows how long," growled Blakely. "What's the big idea?"

"Not at all," said Hornby with dignity. "I've been here. I've just stepped next-door to watch the auction. I looked in on you all the time. You didn't need me."

"Well, you needn't be watching the auction-rooms," laughed Blakely disagreeably. "Your dollar's gone, all right, like lots of the others. You won't have a chance at that three

thou, even if Boldinski ever does give it out."

Hornby did not seem to hear. He had placed his hand again on what was, apparently, a burning brow.

"Of course, I can stay," he said with dignity.

"Oh, get on," growled Blakely. "We ain't so rushed but what I can rent out a few books alone, I guess."

HORNBY did not reply. His eyes were bulging from his head and he was staring at a slight figure that had paused before one of the windows of the book store.

The girl wore a stylish brown linen suit and the morning sun glimmered in her bobbed golden hair. But to Hornby she might as well have been a sea-serpent.

A sickening sensation attacked the pit of his stomach and the rows of familiar books around him began a solemn ring-around-a-rosey.

"Say," said Blakely, alarmed, "I believe you *are* sick! Thought you were putting one over on me. Here, sit down."

But that was the last thing Hornby wanted to do. His one desire was to run, and about as rapidly as he could manage it.

In that dusty old corner behind the pile of books was the black bag with the stolen green-and-gold vase, and here was the girl out of whose cheap little store he had stolen it the night before!

Was she coming in? Surely her taste would not run to books. Jazz music, now, or some of those gaudy jewelry stores, or maybe a candy shop.

"I—I guess I'll be going, Blakely," he said weakly. "I'll be back as soon as I can manage it."

The girl was coming in. Could he go and leave that precious bag with its precious contents in the store with that girl and Blakely? He could not. Neither could he stop and face the girl.

There was no chance that she had seen him there. But there was every chance that, missing the vase after the departure of the timid young man who had asked for a flashlight, she had decided that said timid young man had left with the vase.

It would be rather hard for anyone to decide what he wanted with a thing like that, but not if she once stepped into Boldinski's and heard Lemont explaining about the three-thousand-dollar guessing contest! "How many beads in this bee-utiful vase? A dollar a ticket—a ticket a guess!"

Ye gods! Maybe already that astute young woman had seen Boldinski's vase and knew all about the contest. It was talked of a lot.

Blakely was walking toward the front of the store. He had sensed a possible customer. John Hornby stooped in the corner, dragged out his black bag, and slid out the back door. There he stopped and wiped his damp brow.

THAT had been an escape! Suppose that girl had seen him? Even if she hadn't missed the vase, and in all probability she hadn't, she would know where to find him. He would just as soon she didn't know. And she was too close to Boldinski's, where the guessing contest was advertised, for the comfort of Mr. Hornby's mind.

He had never seen that girl before. What was she doing up in that section of the long boardwalk the morning after he had swiped that vase from her dusty old shelves?

Hornby's plan had been to enter the Boldinski store, watch his chance to slide into that little rear room, the location of which small apartment he knew well, hide behind some of the heavy draperies and seize his chance to change the vases.

But now, with this girl in the book store next-door, did he dare enter Boldinski's? Suppose she came in and saw him there? And anyhow, if she ever saw the green-and-gold vase that held the beads in the contest, that smart young person who had thought him so dumb that a lantern would serve him in place of a flashlight would surely recall instantly that she had a vase just like it in the shop at home.

Then the loss would be discovered but, of course, not pinned upon him, the timid young man of the flashlight; for if the vase were missed so much later than his call plenty of other people might have taken it.

Oh, no—it would not be pinned upon him unless the young woman saw Lemont hand him the three thousand dollars! Even then—what could she prove?

Nothing, provided he had had the sense to destroy her darned old vase! Well, there was the wide, vast ocean, and there was plenty of concrete in town! Lose it or smash it—one or the other should be easy.

Time was precious, and he could not afford to lose that day. He must forget the girl and get busy. Blakely, too, would grow suspicious if he stayed away from the store much more.

And entering through the rear of the empty real-estate hall, Hornby strolled into the orientally scented, richly colored atmosphere of Samuel Boldinski's store.

CHAPTER IV

THE TWO VASES

TO JOHN HORNBY, stepping into the Boldinski store was like slipping between the covers of some of the fascinating books he rented or sold. Even the scent of incense that hung over its voluptuously colored interior made it a thing apart, took Hornby completely out of himself.

A daring that never would have been his in the book store next-door seemed to invest him the moment he entered it.

A mischievous chance seemed still to be aiding John Hornby on his first step on the road to crime. There was no one in the store when he walked in and, although he knew that that condition of affairs would not last long, he instantly made the best of it, his heart pounding.

With a glance at the richly draped platform where Lemont stood every night, and another at the black-draped pedestal whereon the green-and-gold vase reposed, he walked back to the room where the vase was always on exhibition.

There it stood, alone on the table. But Hornby had no time to make the substitution. A quick step approaching sent him behind one of the dark draperies that lined the walls, his black bag at his feet.

That one step made him a criminal. If old Boldinski saw him there, or Lemont either, they would arrest him. He would be thrown out of Spray City if he got no worse.

But the thing was done. Hornby stood, shaking a bit, behind the heavy drapery, his eyes, through a slight opening, fastened upon the green-and-gold vase that reposed on the table so close to him.

Lemont entered the room hurriedly, sought for a paper on the table, found it, and passed out again. Hornby's chance had come. Was he equal to it? Did he dare——?

It was now or never. Now, or give up the chance to get that three thousand for his own.

STEPPING from the curtains, Hornby laid his hands on the fat green-

and-gold vase, the thing that had haunted him for days and nights.

The thing was done. In his black bag reposed the real vase, and on the table shimmered and shone the one he had stolen from the cheap little shop of the girl who was probably even then perusing some thrilling love story in the book shop next-door.

That girl made Hornby distinctly uncomfortable. He decided to think of her as little as possible. She could not possibly prove that he had taken that vase. No one could.

And now he was sitting pretty. For he knew to a bead just how many that vase yonder held, and the original vase, the one Lemont nightly twirled beneath his long, slim fingers, was in his bag, was his to examine at his leisure! It only remained now to make a safe exit.

After an agonizing moment of indecision, his nerves aching, Hornby decided to walk out through the store as though his errand there had been an innocent one. He dropped in often enough to have his presence cause no comment.

And so long as the green-and-gold vase stood safely upon that table there would be no excitement. But Mr. Hornby was far ahead of the game. He could regard Lemont with a slight sense of superiority.

People were gathering for the morning auction as Hornby emerged into the outer room, the black bag hanging boldly from his hand. Mamie Cohen was showing beads to some ladies, and Boldinski was trying to make a sale of an Oriental rug.

No one paid any attention to John Hornby as he sauntered through the store, trying to carry the bag as though it did not weigh much. It had been too easy! Was all crime so easy? The thing so far had been a cinch.

But even as ne emerged into the sunshine, glancing sharply about for the girl whose vase he had left in Boldinski's back room, Hornby knew that he would never have the nerve to change the vases again.

A lucky thing he had counted the beads in the stolen vase, for he would never hope to have chance with him again as it had been that morning. Never again would he have the courage to hide behind those dark draperies, to saunter out and through the store. A man couldn't push luck like that. Let well enough alone.

Lemont would have to count the beads in the false vase on Friday night and he, Hornby, would have to take his chance that the cheat would not be discovered. He would never juggle with those vases again, and the sooner he got rid of this one, the better!

Boldinski, too, might stop him the second trip and ask what he had in his black bag, and then—what?

Hornby shuddered. He disliked thoughts of jails and policemen and all that his criminal action brought to mind. No, assuredly he could not go back with the real vase, which was what he had intended to do when he first spotted the other vase in the girl's shop.

This one daring step had taken a lot out of him. His knees shook. The bracing air did not seem to brace. But he was safe enough and the three thousand dollars was certainly his.

At the thought of it Mr. Hornby felt new life course along his veins, although the realization that it must be the false vase that Lemont, with his cleverness, would have in his hands on Friday night, left a bad taste in his mouth. It seemed like such a poor piece of work, left unfinished like that.

To make the criminal act complete and neat and perfect, he should count the beads in this vase he was carrying; then, his iron nerve not deserting him for a moment, he should re-

turn to the Boldinski store and replace the real vase, removing the stolen one and destroying it. He would then stand no chance of failure at the crucial moment when the beads were counted and the money handed out.

But Hornby felt that he could never complete that job. He was not cut out for a master crook, the kind he read about. He saw now what it needed in real life to pull a truly big stunt and get away with it.

And the thought of the fair-haired girl from whom he had stolen the vase certainly was disquieting. What was she doing that morning hanging about the book store?

He had never seen her before. And now, right after he had taken her vase, she popped up, actually walking into the store where he worked! And she was next-door, at that moment, to the Boldinski store—next-door to the vase!

If she lingered for the auction the vase would be trotted out again, and Lemont would make his talk about it. If she had not as yet discovered her loss she would naturally, after seeing the vase at Boldinski's, go home and get out her own and look at it!

But maybe it was not her own. Maybe the girl just worked in the cheap little store, and knew nothing much about the stock. Maybe she was new down there. In that case, he was safe.

Memory, however, of that pert young woman made it rather hard to fancy that she could work in any store and not know everything there was to be known about it, stock and all. She was too keen to suit Hornby and he could not rid his mind of her.

IT WAS obviously impossible to get rid of the vase during the daylight hours and so, after locking it securely in his closet, hidden beneath soiled clothes and a blanket, Hornby got a light lunch and returned to the store.

And beneath his decision to drop the thing and lose the vase that night off the end of one of the piers there lingered the tantalizing realization that he had only half completed the job. He would have no real ease of mind with that false vase in Lemont's hands.

Possibly old Boldinski had put in a few queer beads by which he could identify the vase. All he had to do was examine the thing he had hidden in his closet. If he found anything different from the one he had filled and left in that back-room, he would have to take back the vase and secure the other, or lose the three thousand.

Boldinski would call the thing off if he found anything crooked, Hornby felt sure. No straighter than a pretzel himself, it infuriated Sam Boldinski if anyone tried to do him.

And so Hornby could not make up his mind about the darn thing. He would have to live through another horrible evening while Lemont worked his little stunt about the mysterious unopened package, the "good sport" and the little pepper and salt sets; have to stand by in agony while the false vase was brought out and set on that black pedestal at Lemont's side.

How could he bear it to see that young man's long, slim fingers dip into the gleaming beads? Was he right, after all, about those beads? Had he made a mistake about their color or size?

He felt sure he had not, but to live through that awful evening! Yet replace that vase Hornby felt that he could not.

So it was a wretched young man who entered the book store and, with a curt reply to Blakely regarding his state of health, took up his duties.

(*To be continued*)

The Bone Pointer

By G. C. DIXON

"PORT DARWIN."

The Captain jerked his thumb cheerily over his shoulder as he descended the campanion, and Hunter, with a boyish eagerness that had survived even Oxford, took the steps three at a time.

Not that he expected much of Darwin. None of his friends in far-off Melbourne and Sydney had ever been there, but this had not prevented them from etching the place for his benefit. It was, he gathered, a desolation of tin shanties, Bolsheviks (Australian breed) and endless, saping heat.

What he saw, sparkling in the early morning sunshine, was a big lagoon stretching away to encircling jade-green shores. Mangrove trees raised their heads above the shimmering water; on a far horizon palms were silhouetted like the delicate embroideries of a fan; and in front of him, immediately behind the jetty, rose a low cliff covered with a tangle of trees and creepers.

"So this is Darwin," came a soft American drawl, and Hunter found Zazu Betts at his elbow. "Well, I'll say it's cute!"

He laughed. A fortnight ago he might have found the "cute" a little irritating. But the world was very bright and fair that morning, and so was the oddly named Miss Betts.

The day the boat left Sydney on the three weeks' voyage to Singapore, Hunter caught an accent that he found bizarre and a name that could only be regarded as comic. At Thursday Island, a week later, he thought the accent piquant and the name rather attractive. Now——

"Cute?" he babbled, when even pert Miss Betts felt constrained to look away. "I'll say you've said a mouthful."

So said the young man who, only a year before, had gained a warm if somewhat limited public with his "Critical Study of English Style from Browne to Walter Pater."

HALF an hour later, while the other passengers still lingered over breakfast, they were climbing side by side the leaf-fringed path that winds up the steep hillside to the town.

Strange trees made black pools in the brilliant morning sunshine; creepers brushed their faces and wrought queer patterns of light beneath their feet; and Miss Betts, with a little shudder, saw a lizard, oddly marked, staring at them from a flat rock, all the evil of the ages in his beady black eyes.

And then they were at the top and found themselves in the little town that drowses all the year around in the Tropic sun: the capital of a territory three times the size of France, with a white population rather more than that of the Savoy Hotel.

"Look," cried the girl, delightedly clutching his sleeve.

Around the corner they had come on a little quarter of the East.

An aged Chinaman, with a hat the size of an umbrella, was trotting across the street with buckets of vegetables dangling from the ends of a yoke; slant-eyed children with black pigtails watched them curiously from the doorways; and at the open windows little yellow men sat cross-legged, sewing with the incessant, overwhelming, oddly terrifying industry of their race.

Watching these human ants, descendants of the colony pushed out by Asia in the days before Parliament stemmed the yellow tide with a scrap of paper, Hunter wondered what the future held for the six millions of whites, far away to the southward, who have fiercely resolved to keep a continent white.

Pizarro surveying the ingots of Peru, Marco Polo, in the Palace of Kubla Khan, knew no delight more exquisite than that with which Hunter and Miss Betts explored the town of Darwin that bright morning in June.

They inspected a big tin joss-house, full of grinning gods and incense and the magi of the East, and chatted with a withered but affable priest who, for a consideration, was willing to explain the ceremonial.

They listened to an endless monologue from a toothless lady who ran a café, gave sweets to a grinning yellow imp whom Miss Betts described as "cunning," and gazed with respectful interest at the blacks, with their harsh, repellent features and swinging stride.

Directly, almost insolently, the black men stared back. One—a giant who wore patched trousers to his knees, a red cotton shirt and a tattered felt hat, and yet contrived to be oddly impressive — so disconcerted the girl with the peculiar intensity of his gaze that the smile with which she surveyed his get-up died on her lips. A little uncomfortably, she looked away.

"Heavens, how dry I am!" said Hunter. "Why, it's one o'clock! You must be positively exhausted."

"Forget it," she laughed. "Give me some eats and I'm all for an afternoon's exploring."

RATHER to Hunter's surprise she was as good as her word. They lunched, atrociously, at a one-story weatherboard shack whose title, "The Grand Hotel of Darwin and North Australia," brought back to Hunter something of the delight with which he first gazed in Paris on "L'Hotel de l'Universe et du Portugal"; and at three o'clock the pushing back of Miss Betts' chair sounded sharply through the dingy little room, silent but for the drone of the flies.

The landlady, who was also the waitress, bustled in at the signal. She was a large woman and kindly,

but perspired rather more, perhaps, than the perfect waitress should.

"Sure you won't have another cupper tea, dearie?"

"Quite sure, thanks." The girl smiled back and, dropping a note into the moist, fat hand, Hunter stepped after her into the golden flood outside.

Six o'clock found them still wandering, the soft murmur of the beach just below them, enchantment in their blood.

They turned back past a bungalow, the sort of home tired women see in dreams, set in the heart of a wilderness of creepers and flowering shrubs.

The sun dropped behind the great spreading trees which Hunter swore were banyans, and with the cool of the evening came a swarm of noisy Chinese urchins playing soccer, of all incongruous games, with amazing keenness and skill.

And then the last gleams of red and gold faded from the sky and the night, warm and velvet-soft, descended like a curtain.

"Well," demanded Hunter, "what is it to be for dinner—the boat or the hotel?"

"Oh, do let's stay ashore," pleaded the girl. "That is, unless you're tired of sight-seeing. I'm not; but then, this is the first time I ever stepped off the sidewalk."

"Same here," he confessed. "So let's make the most of it. Let's have dinner at one of these shanties and see what the people do with themselves by night."

"I'll bet the night life's fierce," she speculated happily. "The movies once a week and a fancy dress ball on New Year's Eve."

HUNTER laughed when her suspicions were confirmed by a graybeard bushman seated in his shirt sleeves at the other side of the dinner table.

"See? I don't know as there's anything you can see tonight." The old fellow pressed the tobacco into his pipe with a knotty forefinger, struck a match and pondered judicially.

"Saturday, now, there was a concert." They noted that the match was half gone. "Not too bad, either. But you missed it."

The match must surely be burning his fingers. "A pity." He applied the stump to the pipe, left it lying on the tobacco, sucked vigorously and was rewarded by a cloud of rank smoke. "Yairs, a pity you missed the concert."

"I'll say it is," agreed Zazu Betts. "But how about tonight? Say, now, can't you put us next to anything?"

The expert dabbed his forehead with a red bandanna and suddenly smote the table.

"Why, dang me, ain't to-night Tuesday?"

"It is," Hunter assured him.

"I knew it!" cried the old man. "Well, I heard as there's a corrobboree to-night. You seen a corrobboree? No?"

"Wouldn't know one if I fell over it," confessed Miss Betts flippantly. "Say, what's a corrobboree, anyhow?"

"A native dance," explained Hunter, who had once crammed anthropology for nearly a fortnight. "It ought to be quite interesting. Though I wouldn't expect any picturesque Hawaiian hula-hula stuff if I were you.

"Culturally, the Australian aborigines are still in the Stone Age, you know. They can't count above four —or is it five? I forget.

"They eat lizards with a relish, and they believe in the weirdest balderdash — bone-pointing and so on— ever dignified with the name of

magic. Isn't that so?" he appealed to the old bushman.

For a full minute the Australian made no reply.

"Well," he said slowly, "there's some as don't believe in bone-pointing and there's some as do."

"And you do?" put in Miss Betts. "Why, this is perfectly thrilling! Do tell us all about it."

"Ask this young feller. He knows all about it," replied the old fellow dryly.

"All I can say is," he dropped his voice, "one night I caught an *abo* pointing a bone, an' next day I helped to save the other *abo* from the crows and the dingoes. Yairs." He nodded in answer to her look. "Buried him."

"Oh, how terrible!" Miss Betts stared at him with wide eyes. "Tell us, how does the bone kill you?"

"It doesn't," laughed Hunter. "If there's anything in it at all, it's merely psychological — suggestion, you know. The niggers die of fright. What's your theory?" He turned to the Australian.

"Don't know as I've got one," was the indifferent reply.

"Oh, do tell us," pleaded the girl eagerly, leaning across the table.

THE OLD stockman, completely won, explained a little of the black art of the Australian aborigines.

A magic bone, he told them, might be a kangaroo shin or almost any other sort of bone; and to it was often tied, to increase its deadliness, the beak or claws of a bird of prey.

The bone was simply pointed toward the person to be removed and that person died in agony with the bone rending his vitals and the beak or claws tearing at his heart.

"Horrible!" the girl shivered. "I declare I'll never sleep till the ship leaves port. The place is too creepy."

The dimly lighted room seemed to have become filled with queer shadows. The soft and langourous air, heavy with the scent of bouganvillea and eucalyptus, oppressed her with a sense of vague foreboding.

"There'll be a moon in half an hour," she heard the old man saying. "If you wanter get to the corrobboree you oughter be getting along. It's about three miles to the clearing, but you could do it in an hour, easy. Or you could get Sam McGee to drive you out."

"Thanks," said Hunter. "We'll certainly call on Mr. McGee. Where is he to be found?"

"If he's not at the pub he'll be just across the road at the garrij," the bushman told them. "If you like I'll——"

A sharp cry interrupted him, and Hunter wheeled to see the girl, white and a little shaken, staring at the window.

"A face!" she said jerkily. "I saw a face. Looking in the window."

HUNTER sprang to the window and leaned out. He saw nothing but the trees outlined against the moon, heard nothing but their dim and melancholy rustling in the faint breeze.

"What sort of face?" he demanded, noting anxiously the pallor of the girl's face and the trembling of her hands.

"Black. Black as soot and as ugly as the devil. That was all I could see," the girl told him, recovering a little of her jauntiness. "It may have been the bad light, but somehow he looked familiar. I believe I've seen him before."

The old man chuckled. "Perhaps you did see a black," he told her. Quite obviously he had his doubts.

"Perhaps that there talk about bone-pointing upset you a bit an'

you only thought you seen him." He struck another match with the maddening deliberation of the old, and again watched it flare away.

"Anyhow, I wouldn't worry, young lady. There's a lot of 'em 'round here an' if one of 'em does take a look through the window—well, there's no harm done. Looking don't hurt no one," he winked at Hunter, "not unless you sees things that ain't there."

The match burned down to his thumb and forefinger and flickered out and, still chuckling, he put on a dusty felt hat and opened the door.

"Thinks I imagined it—the horrid old man," she whispered in mock indignation. "And I believe you do, too."

"If you come along with me," said the stockman, pausing at the door to strike another match, "I'll take you along to Sam McGee."

THE AIR was fragrant with eucalyptus and golden wattle and all the thousand scents of the Australian bush. A silvery moon, hanging just above the track, flooded the rough bush road with radiance.

On either side lay dark seas beneath the gums, broken only by an occasional clearing where the dead trunks gleamed white and ghostly.

"No wonder they say Australia is a melancholy land," murmured the girl. "Those dead trees are spooky. Fancy living all alone in a hut like that one over there, watched by those skeletons in the moonlight and the ghosts of trees long dead. Ugh! If I were a settler they'd haunt me."

"Pioneers are not a fanciful race," commented the prosaic Hunter. "Ah, here we are."

The aged Ford gave a final lurch, coughed, and was silent, and the girl's hand rested for a delicious moment in Hunter's as she climbed out.

"See that track," drawled the driver. "Well, jest foller it a bit and ye'll come to a clearin'.

"That's w'ar the corrobboree is. Yer can't miss it. I'll come back for yer in a coupler hours. So long."

And he cranked the car furiously, was rewarded by a sudden explosion, backed around, and rattled off into the night.

FIVE minutes later they caught a red glow through the trees and a sudden burst of voices showed that the corrobboree had begun.

"Say, isn't this a thrill!" Zazu Betts, her eyes wide with excitement, looked up at him in the moonlight. "I wouldn't have missed it for a million." And she ran across a little open space with Hunter lumbering in pursuit.

Guided by the fire and the voices, they pushed through some undergrowth and found themselves in a little clearing about fifty yards in diameter. In the centre blazed a fire, and around it in a ring were a crowd of blacks—men mostly, with a few gins and piccaninnies.

Some wore only a loin cloth; others, Hunter observed with some embarrassment, for he was not a very modern young man, wore nothing; and others, again, were fantastic in the cast-off garb of the white.

There was one old fellow in what looked like an admiral's coat and a pair of torn plus fours; another sported a silk hat through which tufts of hair protruded; a third looked fetching in what had once been, quite unmistakably, a pair of lady's knickers.

The gins, with their stumpy clay pipes, voluminous petticoats and clinging piccaninnies, were picturesque rather than chic.

Miss Betts seated herself on a low stump; Hunter squatted on the ground and, supporting himself on

the stump with one elbow, could see a pair of adorable legs swinging beside him. Hastily—for he was, as I have said, rather an old-fashioned young man—he looked away.

A MUSICIAN raised a long piece of bamboo to his lips and produced a wailing note, and at the signal the blacks began to smack their thighs and grunt in unison, producing a sharp staccato beat, *huh-huh-huh-huh.*

A wild figure, naked but for a loin cloth, leap into the ring and for a second stood poised, as motionless as a frozen shadow. Then he began to walk stiff-legged, casting quick, jerky, bird-like glances around him.

"Him fella magpie," came a guttural voice in Miss Betts' ear, and with a start she found a black face at her elbow. An incredibly old face it was—sooty and lined as to skin, fringed with dirty yellow tufts which suggested a neglected dog, and surmounted by what had once been a billycock hat.

Gazing at him as he grinned ingratiatingly over her shoulder, Miss Betts thought she had never seen anything quite so like those fantastic gargoyles which mock the world from Notre Dame.

"What's your name?" demanded Hunter good-naturedly.

"King Billy," said the gnome; and Hunter and Miss Betts, having yet to learn that every black Billy is called King just as any Adams is dubbed Bill, were duly impressed.

A shout diverted their attention. The magpie's turn was over and into the empty ring bounded a magnificent savage, as naked as on the day he was born save for the grisly white lines upon his chest. For a moment he stood motionless. Then he raised his head, sniffed the air, and ominously pawed the ground.

"Him fella buffalo," whispered the King.

The Buffalo lay down, rose again, sniffed the air suspiciously and began to walk, casting glances over his shoulder as he went; then he began to trot in circles with ever-increasing momentum.

The *huhs* of the crowd came in maddening crescendo, the smack-smack-smack of hands on glistening thighs beat on Miss Betts' brain like a hammer, and faster and faster spun the dancer until his sinewy black legs thrust out like pistons and the *pad, pad, pad* of his bare feet was like the exhaust of an engine.

"Say, if this hasn't got the Follies looking like two cents!" cried Miss Betts in Hunter's ear. "I never——"

The rest was lost in the frenzied climax. *Huh-huh-huh-huh-huh-huh-huh-HUH!*

A great shout, a sudden silence, a vision of the barbaric figure silhouetted eerily against the jumping flames while the sparks drifted by and were quenched in the black pools of the trees, and Hunter and the girl found themselves clapping madly as at a first night in town. The turn was over.

AFTER this astonishing *tour de force* the next turn promised to be something of an anti-climax. Hunter said as much as he gazed on the excited eager face above him.

"Wait! Look!" she advised; and turning to the ring he saw a black man crawling snake-like upon his belly, wriggling sinuously as he came.

"Ugh! Isn't he creepy!" she whispered, her eyes fixed upon the black shape that writhed like some evil thing out of the scented darkness.

Twenty yards, ten yards, five yards, and still he slid forward

till his head was not a yard from her feet. Then, with a queer inhuman undulation, he raised himself and thrust wild and burning eyes within a few inches of her face.

With a scream of blind terror, all the more overmastering because she had no time to analyze the cause, Zazu Betts struck at those intolerable eyes with her clenched fist. Instantly the black man raised his hand, with what intention they never knew, for Hunter, reading menace in the action—though, as he admitted afterward, it might have been defensive—sprang and swung his fist.

There was a sharp crack, the black went down as if he had been poleaxed, and Hunter, putting his arm round the frightened girl, found himself staring down at the motionless figure with an uneasy feeling that perhaps he had been hasty.

Had the fellow meant to harm her, or had he merely raised his hand to ward off another blow? He wished he knew.

The mutterings of the crowd that surged around only added to his uneasiness. Nor did Miss Betts altogether reassure him.

"That man at the window!" she cried, a little hysterically. "You remember—at the hotel. You thought I imagined it—I know you did. But I didn't—honest. It was this man—I'm sure of it."

Hunter, looking down at the prostrate figure, reflected that even if she were right it did not necessarily prove evil intent. Anyone, as the old stockman had said, might be moved by curiosity to look through a window.

The black man's eyes opened; he blinked, rose slowly to his feet and faced Hunter and the girl with eyes that glowed in the firelight.

"Look," began Hunter awkwardly, "I'm sorry there's been trouble."

The black man still stared at him unwinkingly, apparently without comprehension. How did one talk to these fellows?

"I'm sorry, you savvee?" Hunter found himself saying idiotically, in the idiom of the stage Chinese. "I give you," he pulled out a note, "one pound. You savvee?"

The black, shifting his eyes for the first time looked down at the note in Hunter's outstretched hand. Then he spat ostentatiously and, turning on his heel, vanished amongst the crowd.

"A charming fellow," growled Hunter. "I'm beginning to think you must have been right about him. Notice the way he looked?" Miss Betts shuddered. "Quite sinister in his way, isn't he?"

"Him fella Andeganora—Nighthawk," explained King Billy, still enacting the rôle of interpreter and guide. "Him plurry bad fella."

He wagged his head portentously. "Him," he dropped his voice, "him pointem bone."

"Oh, to the deuce with your croaking," said Hunter wearily.

"I tell you he has followed us all day," asserted the girl with conviction. "We saw him this morning in Darwin; it was he who looked through the window, and now he does this."

"But if you're right, what on earth can he be driving at? What does he want?"

"Rather looks as if he wants me," she replied, trying to keep her voice even. "Exactly why I don't know. Perhaps he fancies a cute little bride from Cincinnati. Or maybe," she shivered despite herself, "maybe he has a weakness for human sacrifices or something like that!"

"Oh, nonsense!" Hunter forced a laugh. "What an idiot I am to let you get alarmed here, in the midst of a few score semi-civilized blacks,

a few miles from the town. Why, the excitement has simmered down already. They're going on with the show. Shall we go?"

"Let's stay a little longer just to show we're not afraid," she suggested with a flash of her normal spirit; and once more she seated herself on the stump, while Hunter squatted at her feet. The jabbering died away to an expectant hush and two bands of warriors leaped into the ring.

"Him spear fighters," chuckled King Billy; and, as the warriors went through all the graphic mimicry of war, throwing imaginary spears, dodging with incredible agility and uttering fearsome cries, the old man's eyes glistened with the memory of many a fight and grisly feast in the days not so very long ago.

"Have you ever seen men killed in spear fights, Billy?" asked Hunter with a smile.

"Thousands," replied the old fellow with satisfaction and possibly some slight exaggeration.

"How old are you, Billy?" With new interest Hunter looked at the furrowed black mask, with its dirty gray woolen fringe.

The King pondered.

"Plurry old! Plurry young, too." he added as a bright after-thought. "You give me tchilling, eh, boss?"

Such a blend of *naïveté* and cunning could not go unrewarded. The old man examined the coin closely in the flickering light and then pocketed it.

"The best shilling's worth I ever had," declared Hunter, as he watched the King shuffle off. "Did you ever——?"

He found himself staring blankly over his shoulder at the stump on which Zazu Betts had sat.

GUESSING that something had attracted her interest, he walked round the ring of blacks who swayed and shouted as the fight neared its climax.

But Zazu was not amongst them and, with a sudden nameless fear clutching at his heart, he ran again around the outskirts of the crowd, pushing here and there through the thicker groups in the vague hope that she might be amongst them.

Certain now that she was not in the clearing, he gave a shout. It was lost in the last great roar of applause that greeted the end of the spear fight.

He shouted again above the hum of the crowd, and this time every face turned toward him. Again and again he called her name in the new and eerie silence, but there was no reply save the echoes eddying amid the dark and whispering foliage of the forest and the white skeletons on the rise beyond.

"Boss!" Hunter, as in a dream, heard the voice of King Billy and impatiently shook off the withered hand upon his sleeve.

"Boss, you bin sabby that one fella Andeganora? Him no good fella. Him plurry myall. Suppose you go catchem that fella, killim dead, p'haps you catchem missie."

Andeganora! — it sounded too fantastic for belief. Yet Zazu was gone. Hunter clutched the old man's skinny arm in a grip that brought a grunt of protest.

"Where's Andeganora? Quick."

The King looked around with maddening deliberation and shook his head.

"Me t'ink him gone away. Him plurry——"

"Damn it, ask!" cried Hunter fiercely. "You talk others, sabby?"

The old fellow shouted a question. The blacks, now gathered in wondering groups, looked about and chattered excitedly. Billy turned to Hunter.

"Andeganora gone away, Boss. Him no good fella. You look out that fella. Him plurry myall. Him pointem——"

"Where is Andeganora?" shouted Hunter in a frenzy of irritation and sickening despair.

For five minutes, ten minutes, perhaps longer, the girl had been in the hands of a savage. She might be dead now. She might—God! that way madness lay.

"Look, Billy," he cried, seizing the old man by the shoulder. "You tell 'em they find Missie I give much money. Much money. You sabby?"

"How much money?" inquired the King, with a cunning leer that roused Hunter to frenzy.

"Oh, ten pounds. Fifty pounds. Anything you like. Only, for God's sake, go and look. Do something."

The King shouted something to the blacks. There came a babble of cries and a sudden breaking-up of the gathering. Some pointed this way, some that, and everyone spoke at once.

"Andeganora come long way away," explained the King. "No sabby him fella gunyah." Which, as Hunter guessed, meant that no one knew where Andeganora's hut was, or whether he had a hut at all.

STILL chattering, the blacks bounded off in little groups and were swallowed by the darkness beneath the gums. Here and there came a glimpse of shadowy figures crossing a little moonlit space, and then Hunter found himself alone. Even the gins had followed in the wake of their men, evidently possessed of a feminine desire to miss nothing of what was on foot.

"Boss!" Hunter found the bent figure of the King again at his elbow.

"Well? Have you heard anything?" Even so, he thought bitterly, did drowning men clutch at straws.

"Boss!" The old fellow came closer. "How much you give s'pose me sabby where catchem that bad fella Andeganora?"

"I told you, a hundred pounds, anything."

"Me no sabby hundred pounds," said the old man obstinately.

"Look!" cried Hunter. He held up his hands and kept opening and shutting them until a grin of cupidity bared the old man's fangs. "That many pounds. Also a bag full of tobacco and much rum and gin."

"Me sabby," chuckled the King. "Boss, you bin sabby hut that way?" He pointed. "Tin hut, sabby?"

A picture flashed before Hunter's eyes—the hut in the clearing just before the last bend in the road.

"Suppose you catchem Andeganora that fella hut, you give plenty baccy, plenty rum, plenty tucker, eh, boss?"

BUT THE King was alone. Hunter was running, running as a man can run only when the rewards are life or death. He leaped a low log, crashed through some bushes and plunged into the depths beyond.

The road—he would cut off the bend and strike the road somewhere; then finding the hut would be easy.

Something struck him an agonizing blow on the skin, the earth rose and smote him and, collecting his dazed senses a few seconds—or was it minutes?—later, he realized that he had fallen headlong over a log. He struggled to his feet and, a little short of breath but otherwise uninjured, ran on.

Came a strip of light, then another patch of blackness, where bushes slapped and stung and clawed at him like live things, and he began to wonder whether he was still

going the right way. Yes, the moon was still over his right shoulder—he must be right.

He ran on. A sharp cry and a scuffling in the undergrowth startled him for a second, until he realized that it was only an opossum or some other frightened creature of the night.

A dead bough struck him sharply in the face, and he felt a freer trickle mixing with the sweat.

His heart pounded like a sledge-hammer, his lungs felt as if they would burst, his breath came in sobs. But the dizziness in his head was going, and all at once he got his second wind and felt a new strength in his stride.

He skirted another shadow, bounded up a slight rise and at the summit stopped, with difficulty choking back a cry. Below, in a little hollow, was the tin shanty he had seen from the road; and from one crack there came a gleam of light.

MORE cautiously now, he ran down the bank and across the open space. From the hut came no sound, nothing but a little burst of sparks, and in a flash he realized what a fool he had been to place so much reliance on old King Billy. Any black would tell a white man just what he wanted to hear if there was anything to be gained, or even if there wasn't.

If she was not now lying dead, or wanting to die, it would be no thanks to him. God! What a fool!

He rounded the end of the shanty, saw a gleam where the door leaned crazily askew, glued his eye to the opening and stiffened like a pointing dog.

In the middle of the bare earth floor blazed a fire; beside it, whether conscious or not he could not tell, lay Zazu Betts; and beyond the fire crouched he whom men called the Nighthawk.

His deep-sunk eyes gleamed in the firelight like a triumphant rat's, his teeth showed white in a horrid grin. But it was not his gloating, his air of a ravening dog about to be appeased, that chilled the sweat on Hunter's brow and sent a shiver through his limbs.

In his right hand Andeganora held a long and glistening bone. One end was sharpened to a point; to the other end was tied what seemed to be an eagle's claws.

Pointing the bone at the girl with his right hand and clutching the claws in his left, the Nighthawk crept slowly toward her; and as he moved he licked his lips.

Hunter caught a low groan; the girl writhed as if in pain and her hands moved as if to fight off some evil thing that closed about her throat.

FOR perhaps five seconds Hunter stood staring—a watcher in a dream. Then the spell broke.

Withdrawing a pace he charged the rickety door with his shoulder, sent it crashing from its crude leather hinges, measured his length over the wreckage, rose just in time to meet the tigerish leap of the Nighthawk and was borne headlong to the floor.

Instantly the black man's hand was at his throat, but, just as quickly, Hunter jabbed his fist into the face above and kept on jabbing until the Nighthawk, with a quick twist, pinned both Hunter's arms to his side with arms that seemed longer and stronger than human arms could be.

Free now from the menace of those fingers at his throat, Hunter had time to think. If his own arms were useless for offence, so were those that pinned him, and in time the black would tire.

But as they rolled over and over in the dust those encircling arms seemed to tighten, tighten, tighten until they wound about him like bands of steel and he thought his ribs would crack. He realized, too, that there was method in the Nighthawk's attack.

Every time they rolled over in the evil-smelling dust they came nearer the fire; already Hunter felt the hot breath of it on his face. A little twist and the black man swung the white above him; another heave and Hunter would be in the flames.

With the fire already blistering his cheek, Hunter flung out his leg just in time to prevent the Nighthawk's attempt to roll. A searing pain, and he knew that in buttressing himself he had thrust his knee into the fire. Hunter felt the fear of death upon him; and not death for himself alone.

Zazu—The thought of her and the agony of burning flesh nerved him to an effort he thought impossible and with a sudden swelling of chest he broke those encircling hands and rolled free.

But like a stoat, or a rabbit, the black man was on him again; his throat was gripped in bony fingers that buried themselves deep and squeezed until the blood sang in his ears and his strength ebbed like a tide and he knew that now death was near.

With one hand he wrenched more and more feebly at the throttling fingers; the other he flung out in blind, instinctive quest of a piece of wood, anything, to serve as a weapon.

Twice he clawed the dust; the third time his fingers closed on something hard and with a last summoning of mind and muscle to his will, he struck at the black face that grinned into his own.

The hand at his throat relaxed and fell away. Hunter gulped a deep draught of air into his choking lungs, felt the blood leaping in his arteries and realized that he was free.

As in a dream he saw the Nighthawk rise to his feet and clutch at his throat; he heard an odd gurgle, and then the black man fell like a dead tree beside the fire.

VERY shakily Hunter rose and stumbled across to the girl's side. She lay very still.

"Zazu," he whispered, "Zazu." And, kneeling by her side, he raised her head, brushed back the hair from her face and tried to test the beating of her heart. He could hear nothing but the pounding of his own heart, the singing in his own ears.

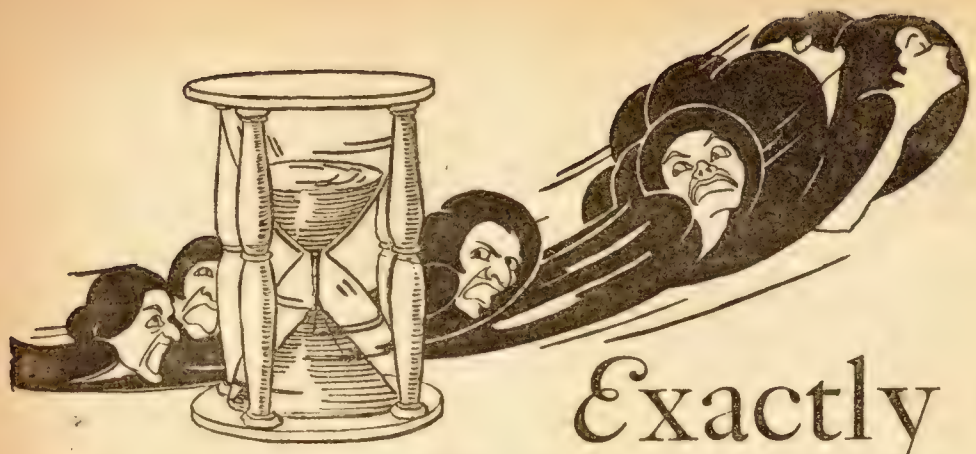
"Zazu." He laid his cheek beside hers, murmuring over and over again that most absurd of names. "Zazu, Zazu. . . . "

The dark lashes quivered and very slowly her eyes opened. For a second her muscles stiffened, the terror of the night still upon her. Then she recognized him, and he felt the taut muscles relax.

"Zazu," he murmured; and Miss Betts tried to smile and with an effort sat up.

"Where is he?" she asked hoarsely.

"It's all right now," said Hunter tritely, patting her shoulder; and noting the faint but perceptible lines upon her neck—lines that might have been caused by rough hands but looked more like the footprints of a bird—he walked around the fire and gazed down at the long and slender bone, once white, which transfixed the Nighthawk's throat and stood out a hand's breadth on either side.



Exactly As It Happened

By E. C. BENTLEY

MRS. MARGETTS and the niece Beryl who shared with her the work of the house had hurried off by eight o'clock, and James Ringrose was left alone. He was feeling unsettled.

For one thing, dinner had been too early, and they had hurried him over it at that.

Still, he couldn't complain. They would be gone just for the one night, they had promised to be back early in the morning, and it had been clearly understood from the first that nothing on earth would induce them to stay in the place through the hours of darkness on the anniversary of the captain's death. That would be a silly thing to do—all the village was agreed about that.

Mrs. Margetts had said that it would be tempting Providence; and even Beryl, a less devout Christian, had said that it would be asking for trouble. Not once but twenty times, they said, folk had been terrified into fits who stayed in the house that one night in the year, and for ten years past no one had taken the risk.

Old Dyson, from whom Ringrose had bought the place, had said nothing about this little detail; and Ringrose had learned afterward that Dyson always shut up the house and went away for his holiday when the uncomfortable date drew near.

But Ringrose, his mentality moulded by twenty years' practice at the bar, was what he called "not superstitious", and he had warmly declared it to be high time that this foolish nonsense were knocked on the head.

His resolve to sleep that night in the house had been announced by him with a contemptuous emphasis which he now felt to have been a little unnecessary. He could not possibly back out of it.

That it was mischievous nonsense he was wholly convinced; but he had

reminded himself, on reflection, that one's nerves could play one tricks sometimes, and he had been glad enough when Doctor Verrill had offered to come over and sit out the night with him.

The doctor had said nothing of any motive he might have in making the offer; but Ringrose had assumed Verrill to be, like himself, an impatient sceptic. Also he was, as Ringrose now found it a relief to recollect, a man of singular courage.

So Ringrose sat by the window and waited, studying his brief in an impending case, and as the light failed he glanced up from his papers again and again.

TWILIGHT was far advanced when at last he raised his eyes to see the well-known long, lean face regarding him humorously through the open casement.

"Here I am," said the doctor. "Stay where you are, old man; I know my way."

He passed on to the house door and soon was in the room with Ringrose who now set about lighting the two big lamps on table and sideboard, and drawing the curtains upon the falling darkness without.

The two men, old schoolfellows now reunited after many years by the accident of Ringrose's choice of a country retreat, were well matched. Both were tall and vigorous; both had managed, in spite of their professions, to be active open-air men; both were unaffected, unromantic, and unencumbered.

But the barrister's life had been passed in terms and vacations, with the High Court and the Temple never very far away. Verrill, as a young medico, had knocked about the world a good deal and could, when he chose, tell of strange adventures and tight places. There was about him a touch of piratical hardihood and boldness that his friend found attractive always, and deeply comforting now.

They discussed in a matter-of-fact manner the conditions in which they should pass the night. It was agreed that they should stay in the comfortable sitting-room in which they were. The two deep arm-chairs before the fire, as their owner observed, were made for sleep, if sleep there was to be.

Doctor Verrill concurred. "Though mind you," he added, "I don't expect to drop off, myself. I never felt more keyed-up in my life."

Ringrose looked at him, a little startled. "Surely you don't suppose that—that anything is going to happen."

"On the contrary, I think it very likely," the doctor answered. He spoke with a touch of hesitancy.

"You see, I've been in this neighborhood for a considerable time. I know that things have happened in this place on this night of the year. I don't express an opinion about what caused them, but happen they did. People have been terrified—yes, and sometimes injured, too.

"When I heard you say you meant to stay this night in the house, I decided to offer to join you, but that was because I am interested in this business, not because I think there's nothing in it."

Ringrose thought it over. After all, this action of Verrill's, believing as he did, was very like the man. As to his half-admission of acceptance of the local myth, Ringrose told himself he had been hasty in assuming that a medical man must be a sceptic in such matters.

His own disquiet, he felt, was increased; and it grew as he began to note certain evidence of nervousness in his guest. Usually a man of deliberate habits, the doctor this evening was plainly fidgety.

He moved about the room, he fid-

dled with this object and that, he opened books and shut them after a glance within.

With an effort Ringrose regained his self-command. "I wish," he said calmly, "you would tell me something about the late lamented captain. Up to now, I confess, I've never had the patience to go into the story attaching to these premises. Who was he? What was he? When was he?"

DOCTOR VERRILL smiled. He appeared to be relieved at having something on which to fix his attention. He sat down for the first time.

"Yes," he said, looking musingly at the floor, "I can tell you about him. He was a very interesting man. To begin with, he wasn't a captain at all. Perhaps he should have been; he would certainly have made a fine soldier, for he was absolutely without fear, had all his wits about him, and was a devilish handsome man in the bargain.

"His name—perhaps you have heard his name at least—was Robert Halliday, and he was well known about town for some years as 'Mad Bob.'

"He was born in 1743. He was a younger son with a small patrimony, which didn't last long when he came of age; for Bob lived like a gentleman—a little free, that's to say, as gentlemen did in those days.

"What with cards, and hazard, and women, and wine, and what with Bob's having a heart of gold, so that he could never refuse anything to a friend, the day came when, for a lad of spirit, there was nothing for it but the toby."

"The what?"

"The toby—robbery under arms on the King's highway. I dare say you've heard that in those days many a man of family, who had had his misfortunes, took to the mask and pistols.

"Bob was resolved to do the thing in style, as most of that class of toby-men did; but he soon surpassed them all in reputation for courteous and considerate dealing and for several years he was acknowledged on all hands to be the best-behaved man on the road.

"He had, of course, to move among a very low lot, and it was they who gave him the courtesy title of captain. They used to give it, you know, to a 'wayman who had distinguished himself and who was what they called a rank nib."

Ringrose's eyebrows rose inquiringly.

"That," continued Doctor Verrill, "was their low expression for a real gentleman. Well, for nearly two years the captain worked the roads north and west of London, and did very well for himself.

"He bought this little place in which he lived part of the time under the name of Lawrence with a young woman who passed as his wife, and not a soul in the neighborhood suspected how he made his living.

"At last the thing happened that he might have expected, seeing how often he had known it to happen to others. The she-devil who lived with him grew tired of him; the price on his head was a big one, and she sold him to the traps.

"One May morning the captain, waking earlier than usual, heard the sound of horses stirring and champing in the road in front there. He slipped out of bed and peeped through the curtains.

"There were a dozen nags tethered to the fence-posts at the end of the garden, with one fellow in the saddle with a pistol in his hand; and standing there talking to him was Hailes the riding officer, with the crooked grin on his knocked-about face that every cross cove in London knew so well.

"There were men, too, moving off to left and right through the orchard and kitchen-garden to surround the place.

"The captain ran to the door. It was locked from outside. He caught up his pistols from the dressing-table. The charges had been drawn and his powder-flask taken away. Even his razors and his clasp-knife had been removed.

"There was only one chance for him, he thought, and that was desperate enough. He hurried into his clothes, and as he drew on his riding-boots he heard Hailes tapping lightly at the front door below.

"The bolts were quickly drawn, and someone stepped out—he well knew who it was. 'It's all bowman,' he heard her whisper—for the two were right beneath his window, which he had now set a little open, without drawing the curtains.

"As Hailes began growling some questions, the captain drew the curtains back, making no sound, and climbed on the sill, with a pistol held by the muzzle in each hand. Then, at the same instant that the man with the horses gave a shout, he kicked open the casement and leaped right on top of the pair below.

"Fanny Bolder's scream was the last sound she ever uttered, for her neck was broken. Hailes got a crack on the skull from a pistol-butt that laid him senseless, and the Captain made a rush for the horses.

"The mounted man, still shouting, fired at him and missed, and the Captain, who was fighting mad, dragged him from his horse and doubled him up with a kick in the midriff. Next moment he was in the saddle; but it was no good. The traps were running from both sides of the house, and as he galloped off he got two bullets in his body, and then a third in the head that finished him."

DOCTOR VERRILL, who had told his tale with evident relish, lay back in his chair with his hands in his pockets and stared at Ringrose as if to say, "What do you think of that?" Ringrose gratified him with a gasp of genuine admiration.

"What a story! By Jove! Doctor, you know how to pitch a yarn."

"All the country people about here know it," his guest answered. "There's a pretty detailed account of the business, too, in a book of local history written by one of the vicars of the parish. Well! Now you know who and what the Captain was, and that's your ghost, if there is one."

Ringrose replied with what he hoped would be taken for a sceptical grunt. His imagination has been excited, and the picture of the desperate robber trapped in the bedroom was somehow before his mind in much more vivid detail than Doctor Verrill had given to it.

An actual living face, white and set and dangerous—a face quite strange to him—seemed to flash into his consciousness and then vanish. Again it happened — then again. He got abruptly to his feet.

"I mean," he said, "to do the regular thing, and go right through the house from top to bottom to make sure there's nobody and nothing that could play us tricks. I'd be glad if you would join me."

The doctor readily assented. Anything, he said, was better than sitting still and fancying things.

Ringrose with a hand-lamp led the way, and they carried out a very thorough examination of the little house, first the ground floor, then the upper rooms.

"AND THIS," Ringrose said, as he threw open the door of one of the bedrooms, "is where I sleep. It's also the room, judging from your description, where the departed high-

wayman——" He stopped and listened, the light in his hand quivering visibly.

"I thought," he said in a low tone, "I heard a—a suppressed laugh; a sort of snigger. It was a horrible sound."

"So you did hear it," answered Verrill irritably. "I laughed—a little nervously, I dare say, but I don't know what you mean by horrible. I couldn't help it. I was thinking of what happened, some years ago, in this very bedroom.

"It's the Captain's bedroom, of course, as you were saying. But it wasn't of the Captain's last moments in it I was thinking.

"It was of Mr. James Higginson's experience, which really was amusing—though not for him. But I'll tell you about it downstairs; it's too infernally creepy in this room to stand yarning up here."

The search of the bedroom and the others still unvisited was soon completed, and the two men returned to the sitting-room below.

It occurred to Ringrose that the cheerfulness of a fire would not be out of place.

He remarked that the nights were chilly for the time of year, and the doctor, to the slight annoyance of his host, frankly said that a bit of a blaze might help to keep off the horrors. A match was put to the ready-laid fire, and both men produced their pipes.

"I WAS going to tell you about Higginson," Doctor Verrill began as he settled himself in his chair.

"Now I come to think of it he was the last person before yourself to take the risk of staying in this house on this night of the year.

"Higginson was one of those self-made fellows who do nothing but brag about themselves, and he made a great parade, as that kind sometimes do, of never believing anything on any other man's account of it. About ghosts in particular he was a blatant and contemptuous skeptic.

"He took this place for the summer ten or twelve years ago. Kenny, the village postmaster, asked him point-blank one day if he wasn't afraid of the ghost.

" 'Afraid of the goat?' says Higginson, pretending to misunderstand him.

" 'I said ghost,' says Kenny.

" 'Oh, ghost!' says Higginson. 'I thought you said goat. Yes, I'm as much afraid of one as I am of the other'—and he went off guffawing like a jackass.

"His wife didn't like it, though; she insisted on clearing out before the Captain's invariable date came round. So did the servants, of course, and Higginson was left vowing that he would put an end to the silly story—like you."

The doctor glanced mischievously at Ringrose, who affected a stolid unconcern.

"He meant to have no trickery, so about his usual time for going to bed he searched the whole place, just as we've done. When he came to his own bedroom—the same that you sleep in now—he found it all as usual.

"He put his candle on the mantelshelf, looked under the bed and behind the curtains, then crossed the room and looked inside the cupboard where he kept his clothes hanging. No sign of anybody or anything wrong.

"Then, just as he was leaving the room to finish his inspection he heard a queer noise behind him—a sort of snuffling noise he called it when telling the story afterward."

At this point Doctor Verrill paused, sat as if listening intently, and then glanced quickly over his shoulder.

Ringrose, who could see that there was nothing unusual in that direction,

gripped the arms of his chair and said, rather loudly, "Well?"

"Higginson spun round, as you may imagine," the doctor went on, "and there by the light of the candles he saw, lying in the bed that he had been actually touching a moment before—what do you suppose?"

"I can't guess," replied Ringrose irritably, "what the fool thought he saw, or chose to say he saw."

"A great, black, long-horned goat was lying in the bed with the clothes drawn up to its chin and its beard sticking out over the coverlet.

"It's eyes were shut, and the slight noise of its breathing was what Higginson had heard. Then, as he stood glaring at the creature, it suddenly opened its eyes—you know those yellow eyes with strange flattened pupils that goats have—and glared back at him.

"It gave a loud, discordant bleat, and then"—here Doctor Verrill broke into a chuckle which Ringrose did not find infectious.

"And then?" he said.

"It asked him to have the goodness to shut the door."

The doctor burst into a shout of laughter, laying his head back and clutching at his ribs; again and again he fetched his breath and roared.

Then, his speech broken with gusts of subsiding mirth, he went on, "Higginson took his oath—that those were the very words the goat said to him: —'Will you have the goodness—' " here Doctor Verrill's merriment again overcame him completely.

Ringrose looked at him with impatience.

"I really don't see much to laugh at," he said, "in such a preposterous lie. But perhaps the fellow was out of his mind. Or was he suffering from delirium tremens? Surely you don't imagine there's a word of truth in his silly story."

THE DOCTOR ceased laughing abruptly, as if taken in an indiscretion.

"Well, I don't know so much about that," he declared soberly enough. "Queer things have happened here—I believe that. And there was some pretty unpleasant truth about the rest of his story, for Higginson was found early next morning lying in the road half dead with fright and exposure and pain, his right arm broken.

"He broke it, he said, in his flight from the house, trying to take the staircase in two jumps; but even so he got outside and fifty yards down the road before he fainted with the pain.

"That's all I know about Higginson, old man; and now suppose we change the subject. In one way it's a devilish funny story, but it must have been a ghastly experience for a man in a nervous state—and no man can help being in such a state in such circumstances."

Ringrose was too honest a man to demur to this. He knew himself to be thoroughly on edge.

When a coal snapped lightly in the glowing fire, he started and caught his breath; and it chilled his spirit to see that Doctor Verrill did the same. They avoided each other's eyes for a time, until Ringrose spoke again.

"Well, I don't believe," he declared bluffly, "that a ghost can do me any harm. Supposing that such things as ghosts are permitted to exist, it's quite beyond belief, to my mind, that a ghost should have the power to hurt me. I'm not a monster of wickedness, hang it all!

"One doesn't discuss such things as a rule, but I suppose you'd say, doctor, that I was a fairly decent sort of devil. I don't know that I ever did anyone an injury knowingly.

"If there are ghosts, they belong to the spirit world, and if there's a spirit

world, it must be under Divine direction, and not a source of danger to people who do their best to keep straight and do their duty."

He had gazed into the fire while putting words to his thoughts, and now he glanced up with sudden irritation as his friend began to chuckle in the manner which Ringrose had already found so disagreeable.

"THAT'S what you want to believe," said Doctor Verrill, "but, my dear fellow, look at the thing in the light of common experience! What has the excellence of your personal character got to do with it?

"Perfectly blameless men are getting undeserved hard knocks and fatal blows every day. You may be an absolutely unspotted saint, but if you take a walk through the Indian jungle you are just as likely as any other man to be killed by a tiger or a cobra—I suppose you'll admit that. And if dangerous wild creatures are what you call 'permitted to exist', why shouldn't dangerous ghosts be 'permitted to exist', too?

"The one world, you know, is as much 'permitted' as the other to go on in the way it does. If a spiritual being can hurt you, it's no more and no less of a mystery than it is if you get horned by old Penruddock's bull. See what I mean?"

Ringrose had risen and began to pace the room. "Yes, I see what you mean. But—one doesn't, as a matter of fact, get gored by Penruddock's blamed bull."

"No; because you take jolly good care to keep out of his field."

Ringrose stared at him. "Then you think—what you're leading up to is that we are a pair of fools to be in this house at the present moment."

"Something like that." The Doctor leaned back in his chair and stuck his hands in his pockets. "My belief is that you're doing a very risky thing. There, you have it."

"And what about you?"

"Well," the doctor answered slowly, "it isn't I, you know, who have been by way of putting the local phantom's back up. *I* haven't gone about saying he didn't exist, and that he couldn't hurt anybody if he did, and that all the stories about his proceedings were rubbish.

"The Captain, while he lived, always had the reputation of being a little bit touchy, and if you look into his record after death, I think you'll find that the only cases where he made himself actually unpleasant were cases in which there had been doubting, and sneering, and turning up of noses—as in that affair of Higginson's that I was telling you about.

"But perhaps you'll think I only take that view to keep up my own courage. Well, I won't say you're wrong. I haven't pretended that I'm feeling comfortable."

RINGROSE, who considered that he had put a decidedly better face on his emotions than Verrill had done, admitted this with a touch of emphasis. He continued to pace the room, uneasily turning over the other's argument in his mind; then he stopped before a small cabinet on a sidetable.

"How about a game of cards to pass the time away?"

Doctor Verrill accepted the proposal with alacrity. "What shall it be? I'm pretty fair at the usual two-handed games."

Ringrose was fond of piquet, and said so. He was relieved to hear that the doctor would have suggested that very game. The cards were produced, the little table was drawn out, and the two men cut for the deal.

Ringrose had never played cards with his guest before, and he was a little surprised to find that he had met his match in a game which he

knew himself to play uncommonly well.

But it was a strange contest. Ringrose's was the sounder game, largely based on a study of its minor and better balanced chances. Verrill, on the contrary, systematically neglected these, challenged his luck by dashing and precarious play, and would be satisfied with nothing less than pique, repique, or capot.

Both became absorbed in the game; an hour slipped by unnoted, then another hour. A time came when the doctor, after a run of irresistible hands, had a long lead in points. Then the cards took to falling more evenly, and Ringrose's more sober method began to tell.

His guest's advantage diminished rapidly, and it gradually became apparent to Ringrose that the doctor did not like it. By the time that his lead was wiped out, he was scowling at his cards and swearing under his breath.

ALL AT once, as he was about to deal a new hand, he jerked himself upright in his chair and stared at Ringrose.

"Did you hear?" he whispered. His face had gone quite white.

The almost forgotten terror flooded back upon Ringrose's mind in redoubled volume. His palms were suddenly moist, his mouth dry. Not trusting himself to speak, he shook his head as he returned the stare.

"Didn't you hear—something—a kind of dragging noise—outside the door?" stammered Verrill.

Almost in a moment the man's appearance had become ghastly. His forehead was beaded with sweat, his colorless face pinched, his mouth set in a grimace; his eyes, wild as a cornered beast's, were fixed upon the door.

His straining fingers clutched the pack of cards; and as Ringrose, fascinated by such a spectacle of mental torture, watched him, he slowly, and as if unconscious of his action, *tore the pack in two.*

The sight shocked Ringrose into violent movement, and gave him back his voice. He sprang to his feet. "Good heavens, man!" he exclaimed, stretching out an arm across the table to seize Verrill by the shoulder.

AND AT the instant when his clutching hand should have felt the contact—there was nothing!

His fingers closed on empty air; before his eyes were the torn cards, the table, the chair, the background of the room. Just as a candle is puffed out, Doctor Verrill had been snatched out of visible and tangible existence.

Ringrose stood swaying on his feet; a heavy groan broke from him. His roving stare, passing over the objects before him, lighted upon the clock on the mantelshelf. And as his brain mechanically noted that it was half-past two o'clock, the little oscillating bracket of the visible escapement faltered in its motion and stood still.

With the cessation of the clock's faint ticking, there was now complete silence in the room. The fire was noiseless in the grate. From without came no stirring of leaves or nocturnal sound of any kind. The phrase "Silent as the grave" came into Ringrose's mind as he stood in agonized expectancy.

A slight sound, a barely audible creak, came from behind him. He spun round, his hands clutching at his breast. Was it from the door that the noise had come?

It came again; he saw that the door-handle was being very slowly and stealthily turned from without.

And as his brain received the appalling message of his senses, the end came. All consciousness was instantaneously blotted out.

WHEN Ringrose came to himself he was lying where he had swooned, with a great cushion from one of the armchairs beneath his head. His nostrils were tingling and smarting, and his head ached violently.

Doctor Verrill, looking pale and fatigued, knelt beside him, holding a squat green bottle in one hand and fingering the prostrate man's pulse with the other.

"You'll do," said the Doctor. "Lie there a bit and keep quiet. I'll get you upstairs to bed presently."

The morning sun poured a glory of light into the room. Through the open window came a ceaseless singing of birds.

"What's the time?" asked Ringrose faintly.

The Doctor glanced up to the mantelshelf. "Your clock's stopped," he said. Ringrose shuddered. The Doctor produced his watch. "Nearly seven-thirty." He went to the sideboard. "Rather early for a drink, but it's doctor's orders. Here, swallow it down. B'Jove, I could do with one myself after the night I've had. Aha! That's better."

Ringrose's brain was beginning to clear. He raised a hand and felt the wet bandage round his head. "What's happened?" he inquired in a stronger voice.

"Slight concussion is what's happened, I should say," the Doctor replied, finishing his drink. "Fell over and cut the back of your head open on the fender. How you did it, you know best. Mrs. Margetts found you stretched on the hearthrug when she got here at seven. I should say from the look of the cut that you had been unconscious quite a long time."

RINGROSE thought it over. "Yes, but," he persisted, "you know what I mean. What happened when you disappeared?"

Verrill stared at him. "When I what?" Then his look of puzzlement faded. "Oh! You mean when I didn't appear. You're still a little bit woolly in the head, old man. It'll soon pass off.

"Why, what happened was that just as I was thinking of walking over to join you as we'd arranged, I was sent for in a hurry to attend old Henry Parsons' wife in her confinement, and there I had to stay till daylight. I wanted to send you a message, but no one would take it, of course.

"I got back feeling tired out, and I hadn't been asleep an hour when your maid routed me out to come and look after you.

"Come now!"—the Doctor's voice changed—"pull yourself together, man! It's all right now. I believe you *have* had a fright, too. Tell me about it later on. Here, let's see if we can get you on your legs and into the armchair."

With the doctor's arm about him, Ringrose got shakily to his feet. His glance fell on the little table, and on the litter of torn playing-cards giving back from their glazed surfaces the sane, sweet light of the sun.

The Day of Resurrection

By CHARLES ARNISON

ACCORDING to our custom we began our digging at six o'clock in the morning, after a biscuit and a glass of light wine. We usually did this because it enabled us to get two or three hours' work done before the sun grew too hot.

Professor Sanderson, I will say for him, minded it least of any of us, for all his fifty-eight years; and a disposition to hard labor is a thing worth having when an elderly gentleman and scholar is compelled to combine a devouring passion for archeology with moderate means and a Scottish temperament when it comes to the spending of them.

So now while I, Wilfrid Carter, junior grave-digger as the irreverent Daphne called me, climbed out of the hole and sat upon its edge in the sun mopping my streaming brow, the old man's gray beard swung up and down in the cut as regularly as ever, and Giuseppe, our one and only Italian assistant, and the best man at his job that I have ever come across, was hard put to it to keep the earth cleared away.

HE CAME hastening out of the cut now with a basket of débris—lively, indefatigable, gay, with the Latin's easy yet respectful familiarity which never oversteps the mark. Looking up at us, he dropped his basket.

"Il professore——"

He pointed with a gesture of horror and imitated the action of one feverishly digging; spread his hands to Heaven with mock despair, as of one who could never hope to keep up. Then, snatching up his basket with a flash of white teeth he made ludicrous burlesque of haste toward the dump pile, where he emptied out the earth, letting it run down thinly and watching with practiced eye lest some small relic might be hidden in it. Then he went back into the cut.

Daphne laughed heartily at the little man's pantomime. She was always deliciously ready to laugh at anything.

"Poor old Dad going after his old fossils always reminds me of a terrior digging for rats," she said; "you can almost see him sniffing at the ground."

The simile was so accurate that I

had to laugh, too. I may say that I was ready enough to laugh at any time during those delightful weeks.

If anyone wants a recipe for the earthly Paradise, I can give him one. Be about thirty-five; old enough to have acquired some discretion, but young enough to reach back to youth. Acquire a genuine interest in archeology.

Then get connected with a family digging party which includes a jolly old professor with the prettiest twenty-year-old daughter in Scotland, and a light-hearted Italian to do the odd jobs you don't want to do yourself.

Then get up early, and do enough digging to be pleasantly tired; and then climb out of the cut and lie stretched out on an Italian hillside. If this world has more to offer, you can have my share.

"Giuseppe loves it as much as Dad, really," Daphne said. "He only pretends."

"It's rather fascinating work, you know," I answered. "One would hardly expect a man in Giuseppe's walk of life to be interested, but he's as keen as mustard. Wonderful people, these Italian workmen and peasants, in that way."

"Queer people you men are," she said. "I don't see why you can't let all the poor old dead things rest in their graves instead of coming here and working like slaves to dig them up. However, as long as you'll bring me to these beautiful hills and let me lie and be lazy while you work, I'll let you dig."

"Thanks so much," I replied mockingly; "and now since I have your permission I'd better go back to the cut and give Giuseppe a rest."

I GOT up and went back, though I must confess it was only a sense of duty that took me. But after all, I had lots of time to spend with her yet; we would be here all the summer; and by that time——

I was on the right side of the professor, too, and must take good care to keep there, if for no other reason than——

The professor recalled me from dreams of bliss to sober realities.

"Come doon, Wilfrid, man!" he cried; "tak a turrn, noo." The professor's English was usually, and when he liked, faultless, but in his own little circle it was his way to relapse wilfully, half in joke, half for the sake of old times.

He handed me the pick and stretched himself. "A graund day," he said, appreciatively, and climbed up to where the girl sat. I went through the motions of spitting on my hands in approved navvy fashion for Giuseppe's amusement, and set to work.

"ROMAN work! Roman work!" said the professor, almost dancing with excitement. "I knew that we were on the track of something here. Anything may be behind that; anything."

The wall we had uncovered only a few minutes after I had relieved the professor was composed of close-set stonework; and the old Roman mortar in the joints, laid as the Roman masons knew how to lay it twenty centuries ago, was hard as the stones themselves.

But even Roman mortar must yield to modern steel, and one lower stone was already cut round. I levered it out, leaving a hole perhaps a foot square.

That made it easier to get at the others, and to loosen them rapidly by putting on strain with a small steel crowbar; so that after an hour more of careful labor there was a hole about two feet by three.

The air inside smelt sweet enough; and, taking our electric torches, we crawled in, the professor leading as was his right.

Daphne by his orders stayed outside until such time as we had made a preliminary exploration, though the girl was wild with excitement now, for all her disparagement of our researches.

We found ourselves in a short passage, curving slightly, not above five or six yards in length; then, without more ado, we were in a small stone chamber or vault, perhaps ten feet by six, and just high enough for us to stand upright.

In the middle, lying lengthwise of the chamber, was a slightly raised stone shelf, and on it a long, plain leaden box with a flat cover.

"A sepulchral chamber," whispered the professor excitedly. In that silent place one felt somehow that one's voice was out of place. "If only the sarcophagus hasn't been touched!"

We moved round it in silence, stepping quietly, tense with the thrill of discovery. Then the professor, taking hold of the end of the lid, heaved carefully. The lid was very heavy, but it lifted a shade. It was too much for his unaided strength.

"It's not fastened," he said. "Wilfrid, help me with this end. Giuseppe, you're the strongest of us—take the other. We'll put it down there on the right, on edge. Carefully, now."

The Italian crossed himself devoutly, and we lifted all together.

As we did so there was a sound behind us and Daphne, a long raincoat protecting her white dress against the dust, came silently in, her eyes shining with excitement. She had not been able to wait. She smiled across apologetically, and we turned back to the coffin.

The professor leaned over it, and with infinite care began to lift the soft fabric that lay there, linen yellow with age, perhaps a shroud. In a moment we saw a face. "Good heavens!" said the professor in a small voice.

THE YOUNG man lay there so lifelike that one would never have believed that he was dead. Short dark hair curled about his brow, swarthy like an Italian, brown with the sun, yet smooth enough, save for a light film of dust. The nose was high-bridged and haughty; the brows black and closely set; the mouth firm, arched of lip, refined, a little sensuous perhaps, but handsome.

The whole arrogant face was that of a young Roman aristocrat. One could see him sitting at a feast in the house of Petronius and watching the dancing girls; or, with short sword and brazen horse-tailed helmet, leading a cohort of Octavian's army across the hot sands of Egypt.

As the professor carefully, after his first pause of astonishment, drew the linen downward, we saw that he was dressed in a short, sleeveless garment, belted at the waist and bordered narrowly with faded purple; and upon his feet were sandals strapped elegantly crosswise a little way up the shapely brown legs that were bare to the knee.

When one saw his arms and legs it was perceptible that the body was just a shade shrunken, but not so as to destroy the semblance of life.

I heard a little voice behind me whispering "Oh! If only he were alive!" and for an absurd moment I was jealous of the young dead Roman.

"A marvel of embalming," murmured the professor. "Wonderful; wonderful! I've never seen anything to approach it. What's this?"

FROM under the side of the pillow on which the young man's head rested he drew out a sealed bottle of opaque glass, and a large flat reddish tile, and looked at them curiously Then putting down the bottle carefully he turned the tile to the light.

"There's an inscription here," he

said, and after conning it attentively for a minute or two, began to read, slowly picking out the clumsy lettering.

"Ego . . . Parphenas . . . Magus . . . Alexandrinus. . . ."

"In English, Daddy, in English," urged Daphne impatiently. The professor began to translate as he went.

"I, Parphenas, the Magician of Alexandria," said this amazing document, *"conqueror of death, wise in the secrets of the Egyptians and the Greeks and the peoples of the East, and of the forgotten races who were before them, send greeting to whomsoever may find this. Know that before you lies the body of Quintus Curtius Torquatus, a nobleman of Rome and a client of mine, to whom, since the accursed Emperor Tiberius seeks him out to slay him, I have given the gift of sleep. If my medicines be good and the virtue have not escaped he should lie before you even as in life. Do you pour into his mouth the philtre which is in the bottle under his head and leave him a while and you shall know my power and see him live indeed. Then break down the wall of the inner chamber and do likewise to her whom you shall find there, Myrrha, daughter of my eminent client M. Helvidius Priscus, who loves him after the manner of women and has chosen to sleep with him by virtue of my drugs. Thus may they be reunited after many years, perchance after the emperor's death. Peace be to you for this service. Bear witness that I, Parphenas, the magician, am more powerful than any emperor, for I can prevail against death himself. Vale."*

WE LOOKED at one another in silence, and the professor slowly turned the tile over, as if this amazing inscription were not enough; but he found nothing more. Then he took up the bottle and looked at it and at the body.

"It's absurd," he said; "ridiculous!" . . . as if arguing with himself.

The body lay silently, confronting him with its unspoken argument. Had he not himself said, "I've never seen anything like it"?

"Try it, Daddy; try it," urged the girl. "After all, the old magician has preserved him wonderfully; perhaps he can do the other thing, too. Do try it."

She pulled him persuasively by the arm. Few men could have resisted her, least of all her father.

"Nonsense," he said, resisting feebly. "It's ridiculous." He took a chisel and chipped tentatively at the cap of the bottle.

"We'd have to look into it some time anyway, sir." I backed her up.

The professor chipped more determinedly round and round the cap. He seemed to have made up his mind. The Italian stared at the body, holding his fingers steadfastly in the form of a cross as a protection against ancient witchcrafts.

The cap came off. The professor sniffed at the bottle, then held it out to us, and we did likewise.

A keen aromatic smell came up through the narrow neck. He tilted it carefully, and a drop or two of clear liquid ran out into the palm of his hand. He made as if to taste it, then thought better of it and let the drops fall on the ground.

"Now let's give it to him," cried the girl, all excitement.

The professor began gently to press the clenched teeth apart. The jaw yielded slowly and stiffly to the pressure of his hand. I heard a gasp behind me and looked round, remembering that Giuseppe would not have understood much of what the professor had read from the tile, for his English was very imperfect.

Giuseppe was staring with dropped jaw, his eyes alight with superstitious terror. As the professor began to pour the liquid into the open mouth the Italian could stand it no longer; with a wailing cry he stumbled toward the exit and disappeared from view.

The liquid gurgled slowly down into the body until the bottle was upended and the last drops trickled forth. Then we stood expectant, well knowing that nothing could happen, but impressed in spite of reason.

NOTHING did happen. The professor became pettish. "There you are, now," he said crossly. "See what comes of your nonsense. I've spilt the bottle to please you and lost the liquid; we might have had it analyzed. And we've probably spoilt the body, too. Aargh! Let's go out and get a drink," he said brusquely, and led the way.

We followed, I bringing the tile with me.

Giuseppe was sitting about fifty yards off, looking pale. I believe he had expected to see the body walking out with us; at any rate, when it did not come he looked relieved and approached shamefacedly, muttering something about arousing devils from hell.

The professor did not look at him, but sat down and drank wine, and presently recovered his accustomed good humor.

"Well, Wilfrid, it's a wonderful find at any rate," he said, munching biscuits. "We must find out about that method of embalming, too. Angus Kennedy will be able to find out all that for us. He's a marvel at analysis.

"I wish we hadn't wasted that bottle. Perhaps he can get some of it out of the body again. It would be interesting to know what drugs they had. But it's probably a decoction of snakes and toads, or something like that."

We ate our lunch and chatted and smoked, tired not so much with our digging as with excitement.

"That tile said there was another chamber, too," I reminded him. "We must have a go at that after we've had a rest. By the way, where's Da—— Miss Sanderson?"

My question was quickly answered; the girl came running breathlessly from the direction of the excavation. "Daddy," she cried, "Daddy! He's plumped out."

WE JUMPED up and followed her as she turned back toward the opening.

As she had said, the body had unmistakably "plumped out." It was fuller; all signs of shrinkage had vanished. It might have been alive.

We looked a minute, unable to believe our eyes. Then I put out a finger and gingerly touched a leg. I drew back the finger as if it had been burnt. The body was warm.

As we stared, its eyes opened—then closed again—then opened and a hand came up and began to rub them slowly. We drew back as far as the small space would allow.

The girl was the bravest and most matter of fact of us. She leaned over the sarcophagus.

"Daddy!" she cried, "he's coming alive. How lovely!"

Shamed out of our momentary fear we came forward, half unbelieving. The young man seemed to see the girl first, and smiled vaguely; then he made a stiff effort to rise.

The thing had become quite natural now, he seemed so alive and so human. I put a hand behind his shoulders and helped him, just as I might have done with a comrade who had been hurt. He looked round, and spoke in a croaking voice.

"Da mihi——" he began, and choked, then coughed and sneezed. Well

he might, with the dust of two thousand years in his throat.

The professor and I looked at each other. The pronunciation was strange, not as we had learned it, but the language was unmistakable.

"I knew they never pronounced the Latin as we do," said the professor; it was a favorite point of his.

THE YOUNG man tried to make a sound, then pointed to his mouth. Daphne, quicker than we, had already seen what was needed, and was back almost as soon as we had noticed that she was gone, with a tumbler of wine in her hand, the rough wine of the country. She held it to his lips and he drank thirstily.

"Poor stuff, that," he said.

I shall not attempt to reproduce his Latin, nor would it profit to do so, since my narrative would be rendered unintelligible to most.

Suffice it to say that, despite pronunciation, the professor and I could well enough understand him, and could, with a stumble here and there, make him understand. Daphne knew no word of the language.

He sat a moment, then tried to rise and get out of the sarcophagus. We helped him, and presently he stood stiffly on his feet, lifting first one and then the other.

He seemed indisposed to talk, which was not to be wondered at; so, taking him by the arm, the professor led him toward the entrance. Passing through, he stretched out his arms toward the sky and breathed deeply.

"I know not how I came into the cursed hole," he said, "but glad am I to be out of it again. Have ye aught to eat, strangers? I could swallow a sheep without cooking."

We took him to where we had made our little picnic fire (by night we slept at the village inn two miles below) and sat down, and Daphne opened the lunch basket.

The young man ate cold chicken and white bread with avidity, breaking the longest fast in history, while we made pretence to eat and watched him. He drank the country wine with a wry face, but thought better of a bottle of Burgundy that we opened.

"You should try Falernian with a little snow in it," he said between gulps.

He watched with curiosity when I opened a tin of tongue, but seemed too well-bred to ask many questions.

Only when we gave him a biscuit—a "Marie" I think it was—he turned it over curiously, saying: "Strange things. I thought I knew everything that the palace cooks can make, but these I never saw."

Then, noting the lettering upon it, "Some foreign stuff, doubtless. Egyptian, perchance." He ate it with appreciation.

As we finished I took out a cigarette by force of habit and lighted it, and he stared at me in astonishment. Then, having eaten, he lay back on the grass and, with a murmured word of apology, fell asleep.

We sat round and looked at him, all save Giuseppe, who had fled when he saw us come out, and now sat on the hillside a quarter of a mile away and watched us.

"This," said the professor, "is the strangest and most incredible thing that has ever happened. I could never have believed it. I'm not sure that I believe it now."

He looked at us as if he thought that we were phantasms of a dream and might dissolve, and I saw him furtively pinch himself.

BUT THE young man was there before us to prove it.

He began now to look thoroughly human and handsome. The dust of the tomb had blown off him, and the food and drink and sunshine had made the blood course through his

veins again. Truly old Parphenas had not boasted vainly when he called himself "Conqueror of Death".

The young man was obviously a Roman patrician, as the inscription on the tile had said. It remained only to see whether he had brought his memory back with him from the grave. The professor began to speculate happily.

"Think what he will be able to tell us," he said. "Only think of all the points we shall be able to clear up. Mommsen will be forgotten forever when our book comes out."

The professor was not thinking of fame or money; he was above that. His was the clean enthusiasm of the seeker for truth's own sake.

The girl sat and looked at Torquatus with other eyes. He had for her, I thought, the halo of a protégé, one whom she had helped to save and cure and set on his feet. Such a one appeals more to a woman than a strong man who has no need of her.

I think, too, she may with feminine intuition have seen beyond the moment to the inevitable tragedy. Presently it struck me, too, that there would have to be explanations. How would he take them? What would he remember?

Seeing how she looked at him I had a thought of jealousy again; then I put it behind me as absurd. Jealous of a man two thousand years dead!

A little while after he had gone to sleep he stirred and opened his eyes.

"I hope that none of Tiberius's men may stray this way," he said. "Curse him, the fat old tyrant. Wake me, good people, if ye see strangers," and he dropped off again.

"WE MAY as well go and be looking for that other chamber," said the professor after a while. "He'll probably sleep for a bit. You stay and keep an eye on him, my dear."

We returned to the tomb, surfeited for the moment with wonders, and set to work.

As I worked, it occurred to me to wonder what the girl we should find would be like. Were the Roman girls as pretty as the English—and Scottish? Would he remember her? What would Daphne think of her?

After taking a stone out of the back wall and drawing blank—nothing was there but earth—we tried the end wall. Behind the masonry was an open space.

Our excitement rising again, we toiled eagerly, and in an incredibly short time broke through into another chamber. In the midst was the same leaden sarcophagus.

Straining hard, missing the help of the fear-stricken Giuseppe, we dragged off the cover and the professor hastily pulled away the linen shroud. Then he fell back with a sort of sob.

Underneath lay a skull; a small skull with even white teeth. Slim ivory bones, and a tress of yellow hair that crumbled into dust as the air reached it. A necklace of coral beads with a little dangling gold ornament. The ancient thread broke as the coffin jarred, and the beads trickled gently down among the bones. Further down, gold bracelets, bright and small, that must have slipped over very little hands.

By the skull lay a bottle, and a broad square tile, on which could be seen the commencement of the familiar resounding words: *"Ego Parphenas Magus Alexandrinus Victor Mortis. . . ."*

It seemed that Parphenas was not always victor over death.

"My God!" said the professor with a sort of sob. "As if there wasn't enough to explain without this!" The little bones were very pathetic. I think we were both inclined to cry.

"We mustn't let her see this," said the professor, giving voice to my own

thoughts. We went out into the sunshine; it was drawing toward afternoon.

AS WE reached the cutting a shriek sounded in our ears, and we leaped forward and out upon the slope. The young Roman was awake and standing up, He had his arm round Daphne, who was struggling to escape from him, and as we looked she shrieked again, and he snatched a kiss.

At the professor's shout he let her go and turned. Black rage filled my heart; the pickaxe was in my hand and I ran at him with it uplifted.

He took an easy graceful posture of defence, legs flexed, right fist thrown back, ready to leap and strike, challenging, defiant.

Even in my rage it struck me what a handsome fighting figure he made there on the grasses against the sky; young, arrogant, patrician, fearing nothing, looking even a little disdainful of my threat.

I dropped the pickaxe and raised my hand to strike, and Daphne gave a little deprecatory cry.

It crossed my mind that it was absurd and inhospitable to fight with a man whom one had just raised from a sleep of twenty centuries. The picture of the pathetic little bones in the inner chamber, too, came back to me. I dropped my hand.

"Filia mea," said the professor, with only a shade of sternness and an absurd effect of the schoolroom.

"Don't hurt him," said the girl, and I thought she was not as ill-pleased at the whole incident as she ought to have been. Girls are queer cattle.

"I did not know," said the young man carelessly. "Moreover, I owe you hospitality, strangers. I am sorry. Tell the girl I would not have hurt her. There are plenty of girls. But she is personable, though strangely dressed. Tell her that, too."

There was a dominating effect about the young Roman's manner. The professor translated faithfully. Daphne blushed. "I know he meant no harm," she said.

She smiled at the young man, and he smiled back. Then he sat down and motioned to us to do the same.

"There is something strange about all this," he said. "I am trying to remember something, but I cannot. Tell me, lives Tiberius still?"

WE LOOKED at one another, not knowing where to begin.

"I seem to remember that he sought to slay me," said the young man. "Old Parphenas, the magician, had something to do with it." He put his hand to his head. The professor heaved a sigh.

"Tiberius is dead these eighteen hundred years," he said.

"You are mad," said the young man coldly; "play not with me. I may be out of power for the moment, but presently I will make you regret it." He pulled at the strap of his sandal, and the ancient leather parted in his hand.

"Curses on that scoundrel Pansa," he said irritably. "I know not what the leather-sellers are coming to. The stuff is rotten. When I get back to Rome I will send some of my men to kick him round his dirty shop."

"Do you remember what you had to do with Parphenas the magician?" asked the professor.

"I remember nothing," answered the young man. "My head feels strange today. Perchance I am mad, not you. Tell me, if you know."

The professor took the tablet in his hand and was for giving it to the young man. I caught his arm.

"Don't let him see about her," I said in English.

"Of course," said the professor; "I had forgotten. Not yet, at any rate." The Roman regarded us suspiciously.

"What tongue is that?" he asked.

"The tongue of Britain," answered the professor.

"Ah! Strange. Come you from there? That is where the good oysters come from, is it not? Who is governor there now; Clodius?"

The professor addressed himself to his task.

"You remember that Tiberius sought you to take away your life?" he said.

"I remember," answered Torquatus.

"You remember that Parphenas, the magician of Alexandria, said that he would put you to sleep with a potion until such time as Tiberius had forgotten?"

"I — remember," answered the young man hesitatingly. "Doubtless that is how I came into that hole," he added, pointing to the tomb.

"Parphenas succeeded better than he thought possible. We have this day brought you back to life with the other draught that Parphenas buried with you. And Tiberius has been dead these eighteen hundred years."

"So you said before."

Suspicion rose in his eyes; then he looked around, noting the unfamiliar clothing, the implements, the unknown foods. He caught Daphne's eyes, and read something there that seemed to convince him. Suspicion changed to fear.

The professor resolved that he must get it over quickly and mercifully. "You have waked up into a different world," he said. "The empire of Rome is no more. Another world has been found across the ocean outside the Pillars of Hercules.

"Men fight now with fire and thunder instead of swords. They go upon the sea in ships made of iron, five thousand men in one ship. They fly in the air with wings of iron and wood. They travel upon the roads in carriages that propel themselves without horses. See this."

THE PROFESSOR took out a little revolver that had traveled for twenty years in his kit and, aiming at an empty jar that stood twenty yards away, pulled the trigger. The jar flew in pieces as the bullet struck.

"Others there are a thousand times as big as this," said the professor, "that strike at ten miles away."

He used the old phrase "Milia passuum" and I thought of Cæsar and the Gallic Wars.

"Doubtless all that you say is true," said the young man wearily. He held his head in his hands. The sun declined in the western sky, and a cooler wind came over the grasses. Far off the Umbrian hills grew to a darker violet. He looked out into the distance.

"These things matter little," he said. "There is something else. There was another with me—another——"

Then it came.

"Myrrha!" he said; "Myrrha!" and stood up. "She was with me. Old Parphenas put her to sleep, too. The draught that woke me will wake her. Come with me, wise man. You can wake her." His eyes shone.

"She was with you," answered the professor, sorrowfully; "but she can never wake."

"She can. She must. If I could wake, she can. Is there more of the draught left, wise man? Come!" He pulled the professor by the arm.

The professor put a hand on his shoulder. "Do not go," he said; "she will never wake."

The girl had been watching and listening, wide-eyed. She turned to me and I whispered. She dropped her face into her hands and burst into

tears. He caught the sound and looked, and conviction came to him. Confidence and arrogance departed; in a moment he looked old.

"I must see," he said. "Give me a light."

I gave him an electric torch, turned on. He took it, unquestioning, and went away. He was away a long time. We sat in silence.

IN HALF an hour he came back, erect, unbending, cold. He spoke to us in a level voice, from which all life had gone. It had grown dusk, and we could not see his face. I thought that if we could have seen it, it might have been stained.

"I have seen," he said. "Doubtless old Parphenas did his best, but I owe him no thanks. She will have been lonely in the Shades without me all these years."

He paused a while. "You tell me, strangers, that Rome is gone, and that this is a new strange world where strange things happen.

"Had Myrrha been here to see them with me I might have been tempted to stay, though it is no world for a Roman patrician where Rome is not. But as it is I must travel fast and far to overtake her.

"Curses on old Parphenas and his potions. He shall suffer for it if I meet him in the Shades.

"You have done all that you might for me, and I have broken bread with you. For these things I thank you. Now, *Vale.*"

He gave each of us a firm handclasp.

"Farewell, maiden. Remember, I would not have hurt you." He turned and disappeared toward the tomb in the gathering darkness.

WHEN he was gone, Giuseppe crept cautiously toward us out of the shadows.

"Is he gone, Signore?"

I rose. "Perhaps we'd better go and see that he——"

We went into the tomb, our lights shining ahead. All was silence. We found him in the inner chamber, stretched across the sarcophagus.

In his breast was Giuseppe's long knife that he had left in the cutting, driven well up to the hilt with a firm hand. The little white bones were all dabbled with blood. The faint faded purple border of his garment was outshone by a deeper stain.

We took him off and drew up the shroud and put on the heavy cover. Before we did so the girl, on an impulse, leaned down and kissed the little white skull on the forehead.

We put him back in his sarcophagus in the outer room and covered that, too; then we went out, building up the loose stones behind us.

Daphne was weeping softly in the gloom; I could hear her. We returned to our fire.

"We'll cover in the entrance in the morning and hide it," said the professor. "We can't have people digging up that place again."

I PICKED up the two tiles, which were lying on the ground. The writing on the red surface was in some sort of black pigment.

"We'd better burn these clean," I said. "Someone might find them." I threw them on the fire.

The professor made a movement to seize them, the archeologist's instinct uppermost. Then he drew back.

"Quite right," he said.

The tiles began to glow red in the fire, and the writing on them stood out for a moment in brighter letters before it disappeared for ever. For the last time my eye caught the resounding words:

"I, Parphenas, the Magician of Alexandria, Conqueror of Death...."

The Secret of the Gods

By KATHARINE HAVILAND TAYLOR

Author of "Yellow Soap," etc.

A THREE PART STORY—CONCLUSION

CHAPTER XII

A NIGHT OF TERROR

THE HOURS—those seconds, hours for me!—the hours were done. My arms were gripped by strong hands and the paper was wrenched from me. I heard a tinkle of metal; something that had been wrapped in the wisp of paper had fallen from it to clatter on the tiles before the fireplace.

There was a hot breath close to my face. Then came a laugh I had never heard before, but which was, in a strange, maddeningly baffling way, almost familiar. I heard myself say, *"Don't! Don't!"* and what happened then I don't know, except that I remembered being flung to the floor; I have no other remembrance.

When I came back to sick consciousness, the room was light and almost exactly as I had left it. The drawer was on the table, but the small idol that had disappeared at the time of my father's death was gone.

The clock on the mantel was beating in a steady, domestic manner which seemed to mock. I crept toward the door without another thought of the revolver; my one craving, to be out of that room, that hideous room!

THE HOUSE was utterly silent as I made my stealthy, trembling way up the stairs. I think then, to my ears, a pin-fall would have sounded like a cannon.

As I gained the upper hall I considered going to Felicia to beg her for mercy; to tell her that I would go in the morning if she would let me live for the night.

I was certain it had been Hale Stewart who had been hiding in the library, perhaps behind the long Eastern, mirror-studded curtains, which held so much of daylight from the room and which, after the coming of night, added to the deep and eerie gloom that was a part of the place. I was certain, too, that it was Felicia Stewart and Hale Stewart who knew the answer to the question that had been made for me, by my finding that bit of my father's property that had

disappeared so unhappily and mysteriously.

Some one with full use of eyes had been hiding and watching me. Some man, if one could judge from size and strength and mocking laugh!

I thanked Heaven—standing at the top of the stairs and hesitating, trying to decide whether to ask mercy of Felicia Stewart—I thanked Heaven, then, that I had gotten Mr. Stewart out of the house for the hours that were coming.

Each second beat a threat. Whatever menaced was drawing closer and closer, that I knew. Suddenly I grew rigid and I went quickly toward my room. I would ask of Felicia Stewart nothing that would tell her of my suspicions.

I would, if my stars so ordained it, somehow get through the black hours which stood between me and the sanity of dawn. And with another day I would accuse!

I LOCKED the door of the corridor which led to the main hall. After this was done I locked the other doors that opened upon the corridor and I took the keys.

I went into my room, where I turned on every light; I made a thorough search of each corner of the room. I locked my door into the corridor. Then, without taking off my clothes, I lay down—of course, not to sleep—and, lying there, my frenzied mind gathered together all the evidence of wrong that had been, turned it inside-out, again and again.

The house was haunted, so much was right; but it was haunted not by ghosts, but by humans, who planned horrors. For what reason?

I could find no reason, unless the spell of the gods had made them captives, unless they wished to propitiate the gods of men who made sacrifice a part of worship.

How had my father's small idol come to the house? What had fallen to the earth with a metallic tinkle? Why was there a maddened-eyed captive who must whisper the hoarse, fear-packed question, "Friend"?

Why did Felicia want me to go? Why the ghastly, heart-stopping display in her cupboard, unless my suspicions about the sacrificing form of worship were a fact? What was there between her and her adopted brother?

Why would Miss Janette Stewart of old Philadelphia protect such form of perversion? Why did they all hate T. Barricault Stewart? What was hidden beneath the atmosphere in The Shadows? *What* made the atmosphere?

I MUST have drowsed a moment in spite of my stretched and strained nerves. I sat up with a jerk. The hands of the clock on my mantel told me that it was two.

I remembered the night before having seen those hands stand at two. Near the mantel itself the strangest thing was happening. The carpet was stretching and writhing, lifting and falling as if something under it were trying to be out and at me. I could not look away. I could not move.

The motion, the tug of that something to be free and out and at me, this held me spellbound, crippled me. Suddenly from one of the windows came a bang. The carpet instantly sank to level and to a stillness that was yet more hideous than had been the motion. I turned my eyes to the window—dull, filmed eyes.

There was nothing but a moonlit square there. I managed to creep from the bed and toward the window.

The porch roof was empty save of the outreaching arm of one old pine. The moonlight, as the night before, was silver. A little wind made the trees moan.

A moment and I crawled back into bed. I was chilled by fright. I pulled the covers high and, sitting wrapped in them, I watched the floor by the mantel, the windows, the door, moving eyes from one to the other—panting, gasping, waiting, *waiting*.

Suddenly the lights went out. I heard myself scream. But as I screamed I heard a soft footfall, drawing nearer, nearer. I felt the covers being pulled from me stealthily.

When next I awoke, it was to find daylight in my room, and Mr. Stewart sitting by my bed; to hear him whispering:

"Child, I have been so worried! They found your door open and you unconscious, and they telephoned me that you were ill. I came out immediately, dear child. You feel better? A little better?"

"My door open!" I echoed. I knew it had been locked, with all the windows! I sat up, but I had to lie down again. My head was swimming.

"I think I'll be all right soon——" I managed to whisper, realizing as I did that the weak Belmont strain which had made me feel unfit to marry Tony was not in me. I had not played the heroine, perhaps—screaming is not in a heroine's role—yet, by very virtue of deciding I would, I had kept grip on sanity. And the things I had seen, not to mention those I had felt, these things were the acme in tests for balance.

I expected, getting up later, to see my hair white, but it was its own gold; and my face, although white, was not older nor lined. I would interview Mr. Stewart, outside the house and beyond reach of any hidden, listening ears. Then, with him warned, I would go.

I HAD ordered that the collection of gods, which had been bequeathed me by my grandfather, be brought to The Shadows that morning. Quite naturally, I forgot to revoke the order, and at eleven Mr. Stewart told me that the storage people had told him, on telephone inquiry, that they were headed our way.

And as he spoke there was a greed in his face that I caught, perhaps because I was made highly sensitive to every shade by the terrors which had come to me in the night. I hurried to the hall telephone to call Tony Steele. Hate of his defection was still in my disappointed, dreary heart, but my need of his help outweighed hate, everything.

"Tony," I said, when his voice answered, "I want you to come to get me, will you?" I had never heard his voice more eager and loving than it was as he answered, with a variant repetition of the end of my question and a louder *"Will I?"*

I heard him laugh. Then he said: "Be ready. And, by the way, you ordered that collection of infernal idols brought to The Shadows this morning?"

I didn't know how he knew, and I didn't even wonder. I simply answered, "Yes."

"Um," Tony murmured; then he said: "Sit tight; I'll be out immediately." And I turned from the telephone. Turning, I found Mr. Stewart; his face was working. "You're not going?" he questioned; "I couldn't help but overhear, child. And you're not going? You promised——" and then his voice broke frankly.

"Come outside with me," I said, "I want to tell you something."

I took his arm to lead him beyond the walls of the sombre house. We went to the rear garden. There I began to wonder how I could begin my story of what I had learned of the mania of his daughter and his son.

As I hesitated the new, red-haired

helper of the garden came toward us, only this day his hair was black and sleek as I had known it. And so I knew Harkins.

Suddenly I felt Mr. Stewart's arm contract. He stopped abruptly.

"I feel danger," he whispered, "and something that is wrong. I feel these things sometimes. I feel this now."

And Harkins, stepping aside into the grass so that we might pass, smiled; not at me as I had known him to smile, but at Mr. Stewart as I had known Felicia Stewart to smile at him. It stiffened me and it set me to trembling. I could not tell friend from foe, except for Mr. Stewart, whom I loved and trusted.

We walked on a moment, silently.

"We passed some one?" Mr. Stewart murmured.

"Yes. The new gardener," I managed to answer almost steadily.

"I—I want to speak to him," Mr. Stewart said excitedly, quickly. "For days"—he went on in the tremulous, old man's way that was sometimes his in moments of excitement—"for days I have been asking that they sweep the summer-house. Greenly can't. He's rheumatic, poor old chap! But this fellow. He can, of course?"

"It would seem so," I said.

"I—I like that old place," Mr. Stewart went on; "I used to sit there so often, Anne, with my wife. It was lovely there in the summer evenings, when I was young. I had my eyes then and I would watch my wife at her sewing—my wife, against a background made of summer green. That was summer, that was summer! Now—always—autumn!"

I slipped my hand in his and I tightened my fingers round his.

"Can you reach the new fellow, dear?" he questioned.

I turned to see Greenly. "Greenly's here now," I said.

Mr. Stewart spoke. "Greenly," he called, "Greenly!" and Greenly drew close. "I want the summer-house swept," Mr. Stewart went on. "I don't mean to be sharp with you, Greenly, but I've spoken a number of times of the leaves and they are still there. I don't like to shuffle in them when I go to sit there. It makes Alice trouble with my boots. Can't the new man sweep that place now?"

"If it's yer orders, sir," Greenly answered, smiling broadly in a way I did not understand.

"Well, it *is* my order, Greenly," Mr. Stewart said complainingly. "Please see that it's done."

"Yes, sir," said Greenly and we went on.

"I sit there, wrapped up in a steamer blanket," Mr. Stewart confided, "sometimes, when the weather is mild, even in December. I love the spot," he ended. Again I tightened my fingers around his.

"You are a dear, dear child," he said, "a dear, dear child!"

We had turned at the end of a curved path and I now looked over the slope which dropped gently to the level of the main way. I saw a truck turning in between the gate posts of The Shadows and I was surprised when Mr. Stewart said, "Is that, perhaps, the truck that brings your grandfather's collection?" He spoke eagerly and quickly.

"It might be," I answered, "but how did you know?"

"One's ears grow keen," he said, "when they must supplement sight, and today, thanks to the gods, I am not deaf!"

"Perhaps it is from the storage place," I said, and my heart sank for Mr. Stewart as I said it, because I could not break my promise to my grandfather who had bidden me keep the gods, and I was going away—away to do my accusing and to pursue the investigation through more expert workers. To save Mr. Stewart and the others who might be threatened.

To lift that pale something from the cellar. And even, hating her as I did, to get for Alice a decent situation where she might be safe.

I saw as I waited that Harkins had gone to the summer-house, a broom under his arm. I watched the truck approaching and then again I cast a glance toward the summer-house, and this time I saw that no one was there, nor was there anyone anywhere near the summer-house.

It was the most amazing thing! The grounds were level around the small structure, and they were without trees or shrubs. There was no spot where Harkins might have hidden. And he had been there a second before, and now—now he was *gone.*

"Mr. Stewart!" I began anxiously, but I was destined to be the victim of interruption, for the truck drew up close to us and the driver dropped from it, a sodden mass and almost unable to stand. There was a heavy cut below one eye, which was swollen close to shut, and his left arm swung limp and useless.

"Robbed!" he gasped; "robbed—out there by a dude. I know him. I know his car. Everybody knows his car. It was that there Tony Steele that robbed me. It was him. He laid me out, the——"

"My good man," Mr. Stewart remonstrated, "there's a young lady here. A little more careful with your language, please. Is he much hurt, Anne?"

"I'm—I'm afraid so," I said, sickened by the sight of the blood that was smeared across the man's grimy, grease-stained face, and more, by the news of what Tony, if it were Tony, had done.

"If you can make it to the garage," Mr. Stewart offered, "we'll settle you there and call a doctor. Can you walk?"

"I guess—a ways," the man murmured weakly and, a perturbed trio, we turned toward the garage.

As I stepped into it I turned again to look to the east of the house and toward the summer-house. And this time I saw Greenly sweeping up the leaves which made dust for Mr. Stewart's boots and work for Alice.

WHERE was Harkins? Where *was* he? echoed in me even then, when I was so thoroughly diverted!

I would see about it when we finished settling the truck driver. And I would set the police on the track of my lost collection, and then I must, somehow, see Mr. Stewart alone—to warn him. I *must* do that!

And then I would leave The Shadows and hunt as close an approach to sunlight as anyone may ever hope to find alone. And experts would take up my work at The Shadows where I had dropped it, and Mr. Stewart would be safe!

In the garage the truck driver had dropped to an old, stained, chenille-covered lounge. He groaned as he settled and, fearing he might faint, I hurried to get him a glass of water.

As I brought it back from the corner in which stood a washstand I saw that Mr. Stewart had closed the garage doors and that he had locked them with a padlock, and that the key of this he was slipping into his pocket. He was smiling, too, as I had never seen him smile. Slowly he took off his glasses.

CHAPTER XIII

AND THEN—

HE LOOKED at us with eyes that *saw*—pale, lashless eyes, but eyes that had the glint in them that is made by keen sight.

"Glory to Gawd! Thought you was blind, Guv'nor," the truckman muttered in a hoarse, surprised voice.

"Many people think I am blind," Mr. Stewart responded in his old, courtly way, "such myths—for reasons at which you may guess later, when, by the bye, you will have plenty of *time* for guessing—such myths serve a purpose."

The man who had dropped to the lounge, of a dulled, stained red, sat up slowly, painfully, and leaned forward. "What's the big idea of lockin' them doors?" he questioned with a belligerence which reassured me.

"You will learn in due course," Mr. Stewart assured him, and as he did he took from his left hip pocket a revolver, the one I had sought so vainly the night before.

"Nicely oiled," he said suavely as he looked at it, "and in good shape. I happen to know." Then, looking up at us, he laughed, and I knew who had laughed in the library that night when the lights went off. And I knew that Felicia's and Hale Stewart's hands were not stained by bloodletting, and I knew something of why Felicia had wanted me to go.

And I knew, too, that this burly mass of crude instincts and active appetites and I were alone with this fiend—"my grandfather's friend and my father's friend!"—and that we, the truckman and I, must fight him together, or that, conquered, we might exist together with the demented wreck in the dark cellar. Better than that—death!

"Before I begin on my questionnaire," said Mr. Stewart after his laugh and his verbal meditation on his pistol and his look at us, "I want to give the young lady a souvenir; one that Alec, in his mistaken wish to warn her and help her—a wish, by the way, for which he will, in a short space, be punished with her—one that Alec tried to give her last night through the gratings of my library fireplace. The giving of these small souvenirs is the habit of an old-fashioned host, perhaps, but I am old-fashioned. I keep my guests a long, long time. No week-ends here! And I give to them odd, small trinkets!"

HE FUMBLED in a vest pocket as he finished and he bade me hold out my hand. I did. I looked in my palm and in it lay the ring that my father had worn on the night of his death. The ring that had carved on it the arms of "the tragic Belmonts".

My knees grew weak, but I set my teeth on my lower lips until the taste of blood and pain, physical pain, steadied me, and so I kept from slipping away.

There was no time for reflection in those moments, but often the subconscious thinks for one while every brisker lobe of the upper mind is absorbed by the whirl of passing events, and given over to them. Now my lower mind told me that if I fainted I might wake up somewhere else, and that the thing to do was to stay on earth and *fight!*

Suddenly Mr. Stewart's suavity vanished.

"Working together, you pretty pair?" he asked, and as I had never before heard him speak.

"What do you mean?" I questioned with a stridency in my tone that made me hear Felicia's voice, and know where she had gained the strain that often made her speak so shrilly.

"None of that!" he ordered as roughly as would any dock hand. "Your lover robbed this truck," he went on; "your lover, Anthony Steele. You in it, too?" he questioned of the man who, groaning, whispered a denial.

"Well, we shall see," Mr. Stewart said slowly. "I trust no one. Not even you, *'dear child'!*" and his cynical echo of his old name for me did more to make me fear him than had anything else of all those tragedy-threatening moments.

"You heard of my chauffeur's being murdered?" he questioned, turning to the truckman. "It was in all the papers. Especially well-featured it was, such a scare-head-lined affair as you would read, if you can read?"

"I read it," the man answered and I saw that he was badly frightened by the tremor of his heavy, low, rough voice.

"And no one will ever know that you and I and Miss Belmont of 'the tragic Belmonts' discussed it," Mr. Stewart stated. "Covered tracks are best hidden if they run apart from the straight and narrow way that is followed by the world. But sit down, Miss Belmont. We have quite a little discussion ahead of us."

HE POINTED to a chair and, head as high as I could keep it, I made way to it, to settle with gratitude. The trembling of my knees was threatening me. I had no wish to give up ingloriously or until I must.

Mr. Stewart, still standing, again inspected his revolver. The other 'guest' and I studied him. Where was Tony, I wondered in undercurrent thought. Had he disappeared with the gods which I now feared with heart, soul, mind and flesh?

I glanced down quickly at my small wrist watch. He had said he would be "right out" and as he drove it would take him only a few short seconds to come from the main roadway, where he had done his thieving, to The Shadows. And if Tony were gone, as it seemed, what chance had I?

"Don't disturb yourselves, please," said Mr. Stewart as he crossed the floor to open the door of a cupboard which opened under the stairs; "I shall be annoyed if you feel that you must rise when I do, or give yourselves to any old-fashioned ceremony. So put out, I might use this small affair," and he waved his revolver.

I looked at the truck driver to find him looking at me, eyes narrowed. He whispered, "Ravin' crazy."

I wished it had been so simple!

After Mr. Stewart opened the door he touched a button that was inside and against the outer wall. He reached in to locate this by feeling, his revolver leveled on us—first me, then the man, from one to the other—surely, steadily, unceasingly.

After he touched the button I saw the floor of the cupboard raise and below it was evidently a stairs, for Mr. Stewart called down this a loud strong, "Alec!" and from below came shuffling, dragging noises.

A moment and Mr. Stewart gave an order, a curt, short, "Come up!" and the creature came; the wild-eyed, pallid human being of a cellar-bleached skin and matted, tousled, unkempt hair.

In the light he blinked and he cringed and he held his arm above his head as if to ward off a blow as he passed Barricault Stewart.

"Alec," Mr. Stewart murmured, his old, soft-voiced self. "One of my oldest pensioners."

The boy stared at us, grinning feebly, his chin, on which water had made dead-white streaks, dropping as he studied me. "Girl," he said feebly.

"Ah, quite right, Alec," Mr. Stewart agreed, "and 'a daughter of the Gods, divinely fair', if not 'divinely tall,' and—ripe for love! Ah, gentlemen?"

Alec laughed the relaxed, silly laugh of the weak-minded. The truckman frowned. Decency was in him, I thought. I prayed that my thought was true!

"My cat—my cat!" Alec said suddenly and in a monotone.

"Yes," Mr. Stewart answered, "your cat, your pet, hung by her throat, eh, Alec? Because the gods—the little gods—did not like your disobedience.

And worse things have happened, eh, Alec?"

A flicker of fear went over the weak, pale face. The boy cringed and again he held up his thin arm as if to ward off a blow.

"You will do as I say, Alec?"

MR. STEWART waited after his question, smiling as he waited. I glanced down at my watch. Ten minutes had gone by. Tony! Tony! If Tony did not come—what? And had he intended to come? Or were the gods luring him elsewhere?

I closed my eyes to say a prayer and never had I said so fervent a prayer.

But outside the garage there was only deadly stillness.

"There is a cellar under this garage," Mr. Stewart informed us, "and no one who *can* will tell of it. It leads to the cellar under the house where there is often groaning" (he nodded toward Alec) "and a certain form of madness that is not pretty nor pleasant to be near." He paused a moment, smiling at me.

"Miss Belmont and I will now proceed to inspect her new quarters," he stated after his pause, "and then we will drug you, my chance guest, and so quite you until I decide what to do with you. This way, please, Miss Belmont," he said to me.

I could not move. "What—lagging?" he questioned of me, "and we were once so prompt!"

I got up, swayingly. "Before you do this—this thing"—I heard myself say, and as if from far away, my voice came to me—"remember, I have friends."

"And I, also," he responded. "What treasures, friends! No one but my friends needs know that you are not in my house working for me," he pointed out, "or, if that would not serve, that you have gone to work for my dear brother in California, suddenly and at his urgent request. Such things are done, you know! I could keep you hidden thus for years," he went on loudly, "and I can and I do seal lips so that they may never again open," he added, with a look toward the truck driver. "It is all so simple *when one knows how.*"

"There's Tony," I said, weakly.

He laughed: "'Here today and gone tomorrow' is my favorite motto. I apply it when friends and employees threaten my interests. This way!" he ordered.

Still I could not move. I was physically incapable of motion; hands, feet turned to lead by terror; body a palsied thing, and not my own.

"Alice," I gasped, "Alice will tell——"

"Oh no!" he disagreed. And I, with sudden onslaught of dizzy sickness, wondered whether Alice, too, were gone! Whether Alice's lips had been sealed so that they would never again open, or tell a tale?

"Harkins," I added, and in an even lower voice. Telling, weakly, my rosary of faint hopes.

Mr. Stewart laughed loudly, sneeringly.

"Have you seen Harkins?" he asked of Alec. Alec nodded; his face twitched. Again he cringed; again he held his arm before his bent head, as if to ward off a hard blow.

"Show the lady the way, Alec!" Mr. Stewart said, in almost a shout. I got up, to creep, unsteadily, across that rough board floor.

Mr. Stewart, gun trained on the truckman, was snapping the lock of the cupboard door, to and fro. "A good lock," he said, as I neared him, "but you will find that for yourself, later."

The stairs were steep. I looked down at Alec, who had taken the descent on a run. For a moment I closed my eyes. The boy was crouched at the bottom of the stairs, arm

up in the gesture I had learned too well.

Mr. Stewart called, "She can't hurt you, but you can hurt her if you like; she might make funny noises that would make you laugh, Alec. He has a pretty sense of humor," he ended, speaking to me.

My foot on the top stair—the second——

And then——

CHAPTER XIV

THE PELLET OF DEATH

THE DOOR was shut behind me. I heard the slide of the lock; there was confusion in the garage. I beat upon the door with all my strength and as I pounded, Alec crept up the stair to grip my arms.

"No-no-no-no," he said, over and over again in a chant of an utter level. I turned to fight them off, desperate and horrified by the strength I had not suspected to be in this weak-looking, cellar-bleached relic. And as I turned I saw below me—Alice!

"Alice!" I called, as loudly as I could, but almost fainting from relief; my voice came weak, and her name on a gasp.

She set her hands on her hips, assuming the belligerent pose of the fighting slum element, and her lips curled.

"'Alice'!" she echoed in a cruel travesty of my relieved appeal. "Well, 'Alice' is no longer at your beck and call, my grand young lady!" she went on. Her eyes narrowed as they measured me, running over me, up and down.

"No," she said, after this interval, "you—you, you fine, cotton-wrapped Princess, you'll be waitin' on Alice now. *Come down here!*"

I didn't stir. I could not. I was absorbed in utter amazement. Even my horror was somewhat dimmed by that, the most entire change of manner, voice and look that I had ever seen.

Alec had dropped my arms. I gave him a sudden, hard push that sent him sprawling down the stairs. Then, screaming, I beat on the door once, twice, three times before Alice stopped me.

She reached me on the bound. She gripped my arms to twist them. "*We'll* learn yuh," she promised, "Alec and me!" Again she smiled and her eyes glinted with a malicious eagerness to be at the "learning" me.

ON THE other side of the door I still heard confusion, the moving of many feet and loud voices.

A dead weight, Alice dragged me, step by step, down into the gray light of the damp, moldy cellar. At the foot of the stair she flung me to the dirt floor.

"In a minute," she said in as husky and tinny a low-class voice as I had ever heard, "in a minute I'll show yuh Harkins and you'll see what may come to *you*. He's a nice mess, the——"

I shrank at the word she used. She kicked at me and laughed—a grating, rough laugh. I waited, wondering what—what next.

"We'll learn yuh," she promised again and with so menacing a leer as filled me with absolute terror. "We'll learn yuh, Alec and me, won't we, Alec? Alec, he does as I says," she ended.

I saw that her teeth were set and grinding together; that her eyes were still fixed measuringly upon me, and were narrowed. Suddenly she spoke, in an undertone loud and heavy.

I had thought I was better than she, hadn't I? Well, I would find out who was best, I would! And I was pretty smart, too, with my fine beaux, Tony Steele and others! But she was

teaching me something there, too, she was. And I'd know it soon. And suddenly I saw that, for all her bravado, she was in love with Tony; unsure of him and jealous—jealous of me.

"Get up!" she ordered, and she added, after a "You—" a word that I had never before heard but that I understood to be evil from the sound of her voice. "We'll show you Harkins," she stated, "and then Alec and you will go into the big room down here. No windows in it, but plenty of rats. And if you scream, Alec, he'll know how to keep you quiet, won't you, Alec?"

He nodded, but his nod was weak. Suddenly from back of me he smiled at me, and his poor, dimmed eyes were so kind that I felt a moment's lift of heart and a little courage.

I struggled up. "This way," Alice said, "and *you* walk ahead."

WE NEARED a door that had a velvety mold grown over it. Alice fumbled near her belt to bring out a big key that was hung on a chain. She bade me step back and she fitted the key into the lock. Then, from back of me came the sound of crashing timber.

I turned, called, and Alice, dragging Alec after her, hurried through the door, closed it after her. And never, till the day of my death, shall I forget the terror that had leaped to her eyes.

I turned slowly. Numbness, dizziness, were overcoming me.

Tony Steele had leaped down the stairs and two officers followed him. When I woke up, I was in the garage and stretched upon the stained chenille lounge that the truck driver had occupied when I left. And Tony Steele was bending over me.

"It's all right now, dear. It's all right," I heard Tony murmur.

I clung to Tony without shame, and then, looking across the garage I saw Mr. T. Barricault Stewart, his black glasses again on and turning his face almost, but not directly, toward the speaker who addressed him. And I heard Mr. Stewart say, "But I don't understand—Mr. Steele's bringing the police and their breaking my garage floor. If some one will please explain?"

And I had never heard his voice any sweeter.

"You will understand," said one of the blue-clad men grimly.

"Fetch the son and daughter," one of the comrades ordered. And again the strained waiting.

FELICIA and Hale came from the house; both were pale, but they entered the garage nonchalantly. "Well," said Hale, as he struck a match and lit a cigarette, "what's up?"

"You'd better tell them," Tony advised; "didn't you wait for him" (he nodded toward Mr. Stewart) "the night Anne Belmont's father was" (he tightened his arm around me) "murdered? Didn't you know of the death of her mother which also was not suicide?"

"I was not in town at the time of those deaths or suicides," Hale answered.

"No, he was not," Felicia added, breathing hard.

"How are you going to prove it?" asked the officer who evidently was in command.

I saw Felicia and Hale Stewart exchange glances. They made no answer.

"Take off the goggles!" one of the officers said to Mr. Stewart.

He took them off to blink and to peer blindly around him. It was so utterly convincing that there was a hush. I wondered, watching, whether it was all a nightmare and whether I might awake, in my sweetly calm

room on Spruce Street, to stretch and to order my bath run. To dress slowly and carefully and then, dressed, to trip downstairs and into the dining-room where I would find my grandfather waiting me. But it was a waking nightmare; not the other kind.

"Blind?" one of the officers said.

"Looks it," I heard in a low, masculine-voiced whisper.

Then Tony took from his pocket a small idol and a strong, common pocket-knife. He slit the small thing, and, as he set the knife into the abdomen, T. Barricault Stewart moved suddenly and his face grew keen.

I watched Tony's experiment with fascinated eyes. The others, I saw with a short glance, were watching Mr. Stewart. The soft wood idol broken in two, Tony shook from it and into his palm an assortment of jewels that were both of great value and great beauty.

"Well, that ends this story!" said an officer, who had reached to a pocket to pull from it a pair of handcuffs, and who was moving toward "my grandfather's friend and my father's friend," Mr. T. Barricault Stewart.

But he did not move quickly enough. Mr. Stewart had taken a minute pellet from his pocket and it was between his lips and swallowed before we could halt his motion—before we could stop the swift coming of death.

UNSTEADILY he moved toward a sagged old chair in which Ditridge had often sat. And here he dropped, smiling.

"It has been—a good game," he said, "and it has taken the—efficient police force—more than thirty years to scent anything—wrong. And much" (he smiled more widely) "*has* been wrong."

Suddenly a spasm of pain twisted his face and made him bend almost double. He screamed loudly, cursing Scharwenka, who had told him that the pellets would bring sure, deep sleep without pain. He writhed.

The officer who had been starting the car, in which they were to rush Mr. Stewart to a hospital, stepped from the car, and the men who had drawn near to lift him halted. He was gone—and he had gone screaming.

One man, only, bared his head. Tony, after a casual look at perhaps one of the most suave criminals who had ever existed, said a loud, "We'd better hunt up the others—Alice Moore, that Greenly, Harkins and the boy."

Three of the men went below, and after a moment we heard from below the thud of axes on the dampened, soggy wood. Then silence. And silence with us.

On a bench that was against a wall sat the truck driver, more pale than ever, and seemingly unable to take his eyes from the figure that had fallen to the floor from the chair in which Ditridge, once a hale and healthy boy and only started in life, had often sat.

Felicia and Hale stood by the now opened door, staring from it toward the highway. I, on the lounge, was sitting up, but I was sagged against Tony, who stood by me—against Tony who, in spite of Alice, I now realized was the man who loved me and with whom I would feel safe.

Suddenly Hale took from his pocket a small Spanish revolver.

"I don't want to," he said, "but unless you will permit Felicia and me to slip away I shall end Anne Belmont's life now."

HE LEVELED it on me; I saw his eyes fill and his chin tremble. Poor, weak thing! Not strong enough to

battle; not strong enough to protect that part of the world which was endangered by his foster-father. Only strong enough in soul to suffer such remorse, perhaps, as few men know.

"Get along," said Tony, "and be spry." And he smiled at them both, at Felicia and Hale who had made my fear and my wish to protect their father.

They hurried away. And in hardly more than a second I heard from the front of the house the chug of a motor, and I saw it speeding down the drive.

"Peace to them," said Tony; "they need it!"

The truck driver, without lifting his eyes from the body on the cement floor, the twisted, contorted body of one who had died in agony, muttered, "I wish I was out of this."

"You will be soon," Tony assured him, as he settled by me and drew me, so willing to be drawn, back against his broad shoulder.

There was another second or so of silence, the sound of a shot from below, and then the tramp of feet, a scuffle, perhaps made by some one who battled, and voices.

"They're coming," said Tony.

Again we waited. I, eyes on the small doorway, knowing not what to expect, leaning forward tense, strained, breathless; Tony, supine, only mildly interested, evidently informed of what was to be the last of the disclosures; the truckman, still absorbed by, hypnotized by, the contorted body on the floor.

AND at last the waiting was done. An officer came first, followed by Alice, with handcuffs around her wrists. She screamed vituperations at Tony until she found, through something threatening that the officer said, a reason for silence and a cowering fear.

After her came Alec, his arm raised to ward off the blow that had evidently been a part of his pitiable, cramped, crawling days. Then two men brought up Harkins, one on either side of him and supporting him. And as I saw him I heard myself give a little cry, for there was blood on the soiled bit of rag that was around his head, and he was thin, white and weak.

But he smiled at me and he said, with a creditably steady, strong voice, "It's over, Miss Anne, God be praise, and he didn't get them gods for all his trying!" And then, helped by the man, he settled on the bench by the truckman, who still stared at the body on the floor.

"Where's Greenly?" Tony questioned.

"Dead," said one of the blue-clad men. "He pulled a gun."

CHAPTER XV

THE SECRET OF THE SHADOWS

A WEEK later Tony came into his living-room, and *my* living-room by right of a sort of adoption.

"Well, Anne," he said, "how's it going?"

And I knew he asked about my mental state which, naturally, had not been quite normal.

"Almost sane," I answered with the real smile which living in Tony's house had taught me.

"Good girl!" he said with a pat on my shoulder; and then, "Anne, I want you to do something for me. *Will* you, dearest?"

"Anything, Tony," I responded, and I meant it. Tony had taught me to feel, to know, that I would do anything for him!

"Do you remember The Harbor?" he questioned. "That book which made such a tremendous hit some years ago—not when 'you were a tad-pole and I was a fish', but when

you were a flapper and I was a 'college man'!"

I said I did, and pretty well. "I liked it," I stated.

"In that," said Tony, "are many good things and among them is a great truth. And that truth has to do with looking at a horror, not running away from it, but *looking* at it until you understand it. I think, as I remember, that it had to do with a small boy's discovery of an unpleasant side of sex. There are many horrors, dear, you know?"

I nodded, remembering some too well!

"I want you to go to The Shadows with me this afternoon," Tony said. He looked down at me, smiling a little, but with worried eyes. I drew a deep breath, hesitated a moment and then I said, "All right, my lord! Your handmaiden follows!"

"You sport!" he said, and what happened then doesn't matter. What does matter is the fact that ten minutes later, hatted and coated, I was with Tony in his open car which the truck driver knew, and hurrying toward the place where my world had said "no one but the Stewarts" lived.

I wondered, driving with Tony through the land made desolate by hard frosts and the beginning of winter, why he wanted me to step back into the house which it made me shudder even to remember; but I knew that, in due time, he would explain. And with Tony at my side, I had a sort of courage.

WITH a key that he took from his pocket Tony opened the front door of the now unoccupied, dreary, decaying old house. The hall was as dark as ever, and more still and repressed than I had ever known it to be. I stepped in; Tony followed me and then he closed the door to lock it after him.

"Remember, honey," he said, "that T. Barricault Stewart is with 'the blessed dead.'"

"I've reminded myself of it quite often," I admitted as, arm through mine, Tony led me toward the stairs.

We mounted them and up we turned toward the room that I had *tried* to sleep in; and here Tony crossed the room to stand by that place where I had seen writhing beneath the carpet, the writhing of a *something*, a menacing, hideous something which seemed mad to be up, out and at me! At my throat, I had thought that night.

I followed Tony—I didn't want to be far from him—and by him I watched him fumble for his penknife and then stoop to cut away the carpet, and then to pull up a trap-door.

"Look down, dear," he ordered, and I drew near to peer down; Tony held my arm, perhaps supposing I might grow dizzy. And, stooping above the aperture, I looked down—down—down. Down a sort of chimney with a ladder fastened to its side.

"You see it was nothing occult," Tony pointed out; "nothing like that struggled that night to be out. It was, instead, the poor demented boy who was not quite enough demented, in spite of everything, to wish another human being to know what he knew, which was the life in what Mr. Stewart called his 'dungeons.' Alec tried to reach you, again and again, in every way, and he tried to keep you from pounding on the door that morning of the big exposé because he knew you would be 'punished' for pounding as he had been 'punished' for the same offense."

AS TONY stopped speaking I drew back and Tony closed the trap-door with a bang which echoed eerily in the heavy silence.

"But, Tony," I said, mystified,

"there was nothing in the cellar to suggest this!"

"Perhaps not to you, dear. But we're going there in a moment. Now come on," and again I followed him; this time to Felicia's room, which was marked for me by the memory of a dead chauffeur's cap and his blood on a dagger, and incense and a grinning, an evilly grinning, god on an ebony dais.

Tony opened the closet and he tapped the wall at the back. I heard the ring of hollowness. "On the other side," he said, "is another closet and, when it is necessary, these two closets are a passageway. A pressure on a spring on the other side, and this panel slides back, to let who ever will enter this room or arrange a neat display for a terrified daughter in, ostensibly, her closet! So you see, the turn of a vicious mind and no influence, dear, of those small idols that make you shudder."

He faced me, smiling. "The whole place," he said, "is honeycombed with these ingenious devices. Greenly, Stewart's accomplice in crime, was once a carpenter. He put most of these sliding panels and secret passages in this old horror of a house."

I nodded, a little mystified. Tony had thought, up to this day, that it was best for me not to talk of what had been, and of what I had felt. So I didn't know more than those facts which had come to me my last morning at The Shadows.

"Now," said Tony, "we descend. Feeling all right, dear?"

"Perfectly well," I answered, although I really wasn't.

Again Tony said an admiring, genuine "You *sport!*" And when a man for whom you care says that, you would enter a lions' cage with a hairpin as a weapon of defence—or at least I would! And so, trembling a little and trying hard not to, I followed Tony down the stairs through the house and toward the other stairs.

IN THE kitchen, Tony pointed out to me the whittled top step of the cellar stair, which, as I said before, let one see a slice of dark cellar from the kitchen and a slice of bright kitchen from the cellar and which I had noticed that night when Hale took me to the wine cellar in order that I might make my choice of drinkables, and, no doubt, so that Mr. Stewart would have the satisfaction of knowing I saw nothing, and so must credit those subterranean noises I had heard to my imagination.

"Alec tried to get out, before he was entirely cowed," said Tony. "See?" I looked down at the whittled step and I nodded. Poor, poor Alec!

"But," Tony went on, "he didn't do that more than once. Greenly at Stewart's order, and often under Stewart's gaze, 'disciplined' Alec; and from what Harkins has told me, 'discipline' is the kindest, mildest word ever used to characterize such action. Watch the step, dear."

"I will," I promised, and I followed Tony; and that was easy, now, for me to do!

Down below we paused a moment accustoming our eyes to the gloom. Then Tony crossed the cellar to a cupboard that was against the rear wall, and which, I saw through a little opening of the door, was full of preserves. And then, suddenly, a button touched and the shelves of the cupboard, preserves and all, were moving steadily, the shelves and the back of the cupboard swinging outward to disclose a dark opening that led—where?

"Where?" I questioned. "Where does it go, Tony?"

"To the garage, dear," he stated. "Felicia went down here, with the

hope of warning Ditridge in time. There was quite a system of signals in this place! Stewart's mania, and it was that, made him preface a crime by a smear of blood on a window pane, or a door. And he did this with a saturnine wish to terrify the inmates of this house whom he controlled."

"Yes," I said, remembering the blood on the window-pane that I had seen the morning that I stepped into The Shadows.

"Felicia and Hale and Miss Janette also had their code," Tony went on; "three raps warned Alec to move circumspectly."

I said another "Yes," remembering Felicia's taps on the idol which stood upon the piano.

"And, too," Tony went on, "she played the *Funeral March* over and over again the night of the murder. Do you remember?"

I nodded, swallowing hard; for I remembered, also, that I had afterward played a tune in which I had, unknowing, adjured a laddie to "rest well."

"Tony," I gasped, and I told him of what I had, at Mr. Stewart's prompting, done.

"You did nothing," he contradicted, loudly, surely. "Ditridge was at that moment bound and waiting. But, Anne, you must not think of that. I would never have told you anything of this had I not thought you would be more worried by thinking you had had your influence in making that crime. You didn't. I know from Alice of the whole affair."

"Tony," I said, "by the way, what made you speak of Alice as you did that night when I found you waiting in the motor?"

"Because I knew she was listening," he answered, "and, with my best acting, I could not always persuade her that I did care for her—and not for you. You see, my dear, I am so essentially honest!" he ended, with a smile.

"You *are!*" I stated, with feeling.

Sobered, Tony responded, "I shall be with you," and then we crossed the cellar to stand by the east wall; and this, under Mr. Stewart's 'work room,' was a series of complicated cupboards indeed. One opened at Tony's sure touch to show me a simple sort of telephone such as one finds in the hallways of apartment houses. And this, Tony said, took voice above and loosened it through the mouth of that god who was dignified by having his own pedestal.

"Who spoke to me that night?" I questioned, my voice low.

Tony slipped an arm around me again, perhaps fearing my dizziness, which this time was made by my look into another sort of abyss.

"Agnes," he answered.

"Agnes?" I echoed in a gasp.

He nodded.

"Tell me of it, Tony," I begged.

"Later, dear," he promised.

"Dead?" I questioned. I had to know that of Agnes, the faithful servant who had cooked our food for so many years.

Tony inclined his head.

THE NEXT cupboard on that east wall was empty. It, too, had a false back which swung open at Tony's touch, and the tunnel, which was disclosed by this pressure, led to the summer-house with the trap-door floor, where Harkins had, too trustingly, gone to sweep away the leaves that soiled Mr. Stewart's boots and so made work for Alice.

"I had him here," said Tony, "as a sort of watch-dog for you. I knew Harkins would be a good one because, my dear, he is another man who would give his life for you. He offered to squander all his savings for you when he tried to buy the collection, your grandfather's collec-

tion of those infernal small idols. Harkins had come to the point of fearing them and their influence. He didn't want you to have them. Rather than that he would have taken them over and run the risk of what they might do to him!"

I was deeply touched, of course; I murmured something of keeping him always and of doing everything possible in the way of kind things for him; Tony said a hearty, *"Rather,* my dear!" and then he went on with his explanation.

"Greenly got on to Harkins," he said. "Greenly, ironically enough, took his last stand here, where he began his torturing of Harkins. Here, he faced the police, who had found him, drew out a gun, but a moment, a second, after one of his pursuers had pointed his automatic toward him and fired."

"It's hideous," I whispered.

"It was a good shot," Tony contradicted grimly.

"How did Greenly discover Harkins?" I questioned.

"Oh," Tony answered, "Harkins is too honest to be very clever about any sort of deceit and when he was discovered, or was thought to be a possible spy, his time was up. So they let him down in the middle of his work and he lay in the cellar that is at the end of this passage unconscious for hours. And when he came to, the poor devil wished for unconsciousness. But it's over, Anne; all over. And this place is now a museum and nothing more."

"I know," I agreed, and I tried to speak evenly, but it was hard.

"And now," said Tony, "having inspected this delightfully conceived little 'love nest,' we're going back to have some tea before our fire and I'm going to tell you the whole story. And then I'll tell you of a surprise I have for you which, young lady, you'd better like! For if you don't, I'll be doggoned disappointed."

"Oh, I shall!" I assured him, my heart lifting at the thought of leaving The Shadows, I hoped forever.

AS WE sped homeward I asked Tony of Esther, the Stewarts' cook who had been, the Stewarts' report said, killed by a motor at a street-crossing of Philadelphia.

"Was Esther killed that way?" I asked.

"Yes," Tony answered; "she was another 'willing worker.' All the servants belonged to Stewart's band of crooks, I suppose you'd call them. Stewart had no wish to be rid of her. And they, the cook Esther, Alice and her associate second maid, Greenly and Scharwenka, worked openly and with utter composure and an ironic contempt in face of the feeble, frightened protests from Miss Janette, her daughter and her daughter's husband, Hale.

"Alec didn't count except as a—well, matter of example. When he erred, the rest could see what might be if they dared to incur displeasure. And, too, to their horror, he was 'punished' for their sins.

"He was the issue who kept the shadowed trio of The Shadows from their sleep. For, until Ditridge's murder, there was no bloodshed that they knew of. Merely this vastly successful business of smuggling and of getting rid of the duty-free gems."

"I don't yet understand the matter of Ditridge," I admitted.

"No one does," Tony stated; "even Alice didn't know quite what went on there but, presumably, Stewart wished in his employ a bland-faced boy who could wear good clothes well and who could thus, without inciting suspicion, sell an occasional jewel from an old family collection

for, say, the sort of debt that would not please the young man's family.

"Ditridge had a presence and an open look that did not lie. He suspected wrong things, as I told you. He discovered Alec, for one thing, and probably when Stewart offered him a new position, he refused and made threats. Poor boy!

"Poor boy!" I echoed.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SECRET OF THE GODS

"IT was all perfectly simple," said Tony a half-hour later when I, in a soft house frock, was sitting by him on our deep davenport and staring with him at our fire. "Want to talk of it?" he broke in upon himself to question.

"Yes," I answered.

"Good!" he said heartily; "and before we begin remember this: that the age of terror, at least at The Shadows, is ended and Harkins, almost as strong as he ever was, is at your call and ready, as is someone else, not only to die, but to live for you, Anne Belmont Steele!"

I said, "I thank you, dear sir," which was flippant because I have learned to care so much that half the time I must hide it else I grow too very serious! And almost tearful!

Tony drew a deep breath, the sort that prefaces a long, long story and then he began.

"Well, once upon a time," said Tony, "as all the tales begin that have in them an ogre, there was a weak strain in an old family—and such things will happen—and it made the brother find happiness through a particularly interesting sort of crime, and it led poor Miss Janette Stewart to an affair which, pardon me, my dear, resulted in the being of her daughter, Felicia, while the daughter's mother was yet single; quite as single as she is today."

"Tony!" I said.

"True," he said. "And can't you see the story now?"

I couldn't. But Tony explained it, while he twisted the ring decorated with orange blossoms, that he had given me; the ring that I like even better than the other ring he gave me, which is decorated with a diamond.

TONY had found the truth through a gathering together of much evidence; through suspicions which were set in him by various happenings, through Harkins' fear of Alice which he confided to Tony the night of my grandfather's death as Tony left the house, and through Alice herself, whom Tony began to "woo" that morning when he came with other friends to make me a call of condolence.

Tony had wondered, with everyone else, why my grandfather wished the collection kept. And without knowing why he did, Harkins explained to Tony the emotion that had made his crafty and sly expression which I had seen after my grandfather wrote his last message to me.

"It's satisfaction, sir," Harkins had said to Tony, "even at this sad time, sir, to know that Mr. Stewart won't be getting them little gods. He's been after 'em so long and so eager that it has fair disgusted me, it has. I don't like 'em, but I don't want him to get 'em. He's been too pushin', that he has been, sir!"

And that started Tony to wondering why Mr. Stewart had been after them "so long and so eager," and why he had been so "pushin'." The mere mania of a collector, Tony felt, was not enough.

Had my grandfather, Tony wondered, started to write "Stewart" or "Shooting" with the "S" that stood

alone on the pad, which Alice, in a moment of softness, afterward used for her one warning to me?

In time, Tony found that the "S" would have been followed by "tewart," if death had not stilled my grandfather's hand; and he had also found that the "Ruby" referred, not to my mother, but to the gem that Alice, laughing, had held in her palm, before the eyes of a man who had been stricken to silence.

SO, AIDED by Harkins, Tony almost at once decided that Alice was playing some game. He knew she was the last human who had been with my grandfather, and the sweetness I trusted made Tony distrust her.

So he fêted her and flattered her and won her over to giving him her confidence and he found her to be the accomplice of Mr. Stewart's crime, as much an accomplice as was Greenly, or the Pole who disappeared and whose only crime, so far as could be told, lay in his disposal of Mr. Stewart's gain.

Mr. Stewart had sent him on a trip before the gruesome murder of Ditridge. He had lied about Ditridge's disagreement with the Pole and so he had fastened the blame on the man who, so conveniently for Mr. Stewart, had seemed to slink away.

The Pole had never been a part of nobility, nor any more in love with Felicia than she had been with him. But he had been marked as the guest through the "Don't tell father that anyone was here!" which she had said to me almost my first hour in the house—and marked this way by her while she must have hated doing it to the depths of her soul!

But she, her mother and Hale Stewart knew the meaning of being blackmailed. They had learned it all too well, and from it, liking it or not, what they must do.

Threats impossible to believe a part of modern days kept the trio silent, Tony said, and made them act. Made Felicia hire Alice, and such like. But in spite of these threats Felicia tried her best to save me.

She had wanted the windows of my room which led to the porch left open so that I might be so frightened by invasion that I would go while I *could* go.

Poor Felicia! And the threats, Tony said, were amazing and made of promises of such torture as all the inmates of The Shadows understood too well; threats of a swift and unpleasant, vastly unpleasant, manner of death; threats to disclose Miss Janette Stewart's indiscretion, a disclosure which would mark Felicia and the thought of which sent Miss Janette into hysterics—poor, harassed, tormented soul!

I said, as Tony told me this part of the gruesome history, "I hope Miss Janette is happier now!"

And he said with a smile that was not explained until later, "She is, dear. I know she is!"

TONY had known "something queer was up." He thought the thing to do was to investigate everything, persons and gods; so he went idol-shopping and, idol shopping, he found himself balked by the shadow of Mr. T. Barricault Stewart, who had a standing order with all dealers in such odd wares.

He must see the idols first, and before anyone else, Mr. Stewart said—insisted! If he wanted them, he paid fabulous prices for them. The dealers knew that, and so they sent such idols as came into their hands out for his appraisal and refusal, in spite of the fact that he rarely bought; because when he did buy, he paid so well that it was worth their while.

This further interested Tony and he began to think that the waters ran

deep. One day he came upon an idol that Mr. Stewart had had and he found the eyes had been skillfully pried out and replaced.

The dealer had not noticed this. Then Tony offered the dealer such a sum as Mr. Stewart had never offered for a perfectly fresh importation. Among them was a grinning, small god which he dissected; and he found, when he did, that *the entrails of the Temple gods are made of precious stones.*

And he knew, then, that Mr. Stewart bought enough frequently and at very good prices so that he could have first chance at those other gods he dissected and returned.

Rubies, Tony said, were in the god that Alice had mangled for the benefit of my grandfather who, she was keen enough to see, would not recover from his stroke. Whom she, perhaps, if need had been, planned to hurry into death.

A ruby was in the head which, in this specimen, was divided from the torso at the neck; and a good many rubies had dropped from the hole she had so expertly bored over the heart. . . . In her haste she had cut herself; it was her blood that she, with a sneering laugh put on the small god's abdomen and upon my grandfather's shirt front in ironic echo!

TONY'S finding this secret of the gods, he pointed out, was luck. He also pointed out to me what must be in the collection of my grandfather, who had, in his cruises, gathered his collection first hand, and who had made it, thus, of the real.

Those collectors on the other side who knew this obscure fact did not, of course, part with the small gold mines; instead, they dissected them and only rarely did an untouched idol come across the seas.

When this happened, it was sent by some ignorant temple-robber who saw only the value that is in antiquity and in the rare. And of course not many real temple gods could be annexed, for they are guarded too carefully.

About this time, too, Tony heard rumor of Mr. Stewart's being victimized by a shipment from Africa of small idols that were modern and of no account.

Perhaps Tony smiled grimly—he probably felt like it—for diamonds come from Africa and, packed in cotton in an idol's body, poked in through the eyes which are afterward sealed with paste gems, the idols would offer splendid hiding place for jewels to come into the country, duty free.

And so would be presented a beautifully satisfactory solution for the problems of a smugglar, which Mr. Stewart was, as well as a murderer.

THE GOD that my father called his "lucky god" Mr. Stewart suspected to hold a fortune. I imagine it may have done so. No one will ever know.

Alice only knew that Barricault Stewart in one of his many disguises (in none of which he was ever blind!) had slipped into our rear entrance to find a library window open and, in the library, my father.

He wanted that one god then, not all of them; for he feared the effect, if too much publicity were turned on those small carrier pigeons which were bringing him so much of wealth. He would get one and make the world, through sly suggestion and dire and tragic happenings to those who possessed gods, fear to possess them.

So, in time he would have our collection and access to others, and start the saga of ill to those who bowed to idols.

He killed my father. Alice knew that, and she told Tony that. She

had worked with Mr. Stewart since he had found her in the slums—an attractive, docile-looking girl with great keenness and absolutely no conscience.

It was he who had gotten her into our house, and she it was who, with lying report of what Harkins had said, made the quarrel between Agnes and Harkins hoping, I presume, that she could (through Agnes) get Harkins out of the way. The new butler might easily be a stupider, less exacting soul, who would not watch her and so make her prying and her scheming and her work so difficult.

But here Alice lost a point; for one night Agnes, anxious to hear some of the bitter things Alice reported Harkins to have said of her —Agnes, thus anxious, followed Alice upstairs in order to listen to Harkins' scathing comment and, upstairs, she found Alice arranging the gods in the cabinet and she accused her.

That was during a moment when my grandfather had gone to the hall to meet his "dear friend" and his "old friend," T. Barricault Stewart —on the night my grandfather died.

Alice was meek and she trembled before Agnes' wrath. Would Agnes please, she begged, give her a hearing in the servant's sitting room? Haughtily, Agnes complied with the request—poor, trusting Agnes!

And Alice locked Agnes in the sitting-room and then she telephoned Greenly to come in "to help" her at a "little job" and then she told Harkins that Agnes said she was to have guests and that she would like the use of the sitting-room, please, for that night.

"And I'm sure," Alice ended, "I can't for the life of me think who can be callin' on her, can you, Mr. Harkins?"

And Harkins could not!

Greenly and Alice drugged poor old Agnes and they were the wretches who made that laughter I heard that night. And, while Harkins was gone from the kitchen to answer Tony Steele's ring at the door, and while Harkins paused with me in the hall, they bundled Agnes out of the rear entrance; left her, a sodden, senseless mass in the corner of such an enclosed car as one would expect to see in a rear alley.

They came back to arrange the display on her trunk and then Greenly motored Agnes, still sleeping the sleep of the drugged, to The Shadows.

There, twice, Agnes found the opportunity and the courage to warn me, once through the speaking tube which led from the cellar and to the lips of a god, and once from the cellar of the summer-house.

And, oh, I shall never forget her "Miss Anne! Miss Anne!" that came to me weak, and like the wail of the wind in the pines. And the last "Miss Anne!" very probably made the last words Agnes ever spoke, for Greenly found her trying to reach me and because of that Mr. Stewart said it was time for her "to go."

It was poison with her, I think tony said. Poor, poor, faithful old Agnes!

ALICE found it easy to get the keys to the cabinet, to swing the door that led to the dining-room, the morning I talked to Harkins; such intricacies were nothing to her, practiced in deceit and thieving!

And it was she, of course, who each night rearranged the cupboard with the thought that it would worry my grandfather so that he would be glad to sell the collection to an old friend for a mere pittance.

But there were difficulties along the way, even for criminals as skilful as were Alice and Stewart, difficulties of which Tony told me gently and

hesitantly and so that I might understand "the tragic Belmonts." Only tragic because of the hard hold that the unscrupulous had upon them, and not from lack of courage, will, or any of those attributes which make a family fine.

CHAPTER XVII

GREEN PASTURES

MY RUSSIAN mother knew what was in the gods and after my father's death she fell into sore financial straits. Rheumatism crippled her hands by which she made her living, and she wrote my grandfather that she wanted a part of the collection that her husband and my father had spent so much of his lifetime in acquiring.

My grandfather showed the letter from my mother to Mr. T. Barricault Stewart. And soon after my mother was found dead.

A box of pellets, that if taken in sufficient quantity would kill, were within her reach; and my father's last line to her was in the otherwise empty grate. I suppose, although I hardly dare think of it, that she took those pellets at the point of a gun.

Tony passed over this part of the history quickly, while he held me pressed tightly to him, and while his arms grew even more tender than usual.

So things went with Mr. Stewart's *collecting*, and the drama in his house increased. The daughter of his sister he claimed as his own daughter—which gesture might have been thought to be a noble one, had not he used the protection as a power through which he might blackmail.

His adopted son, whom he had hoped would be his aide, fell in love with Felicia. And at the time of Mr. Stewart's murder of my father they were in the west together, Miss Janette with them, and, then and there, they were married.

"But how did you find it all out, Tony?" I asked. "The facts? They seem so much an incomprehensible tangle to me," I added.

"Ditridge told me of the relation between Felicia Stewart and Hale," Tony answered. "I knew then that there was something hidden there, for there was something fine beneath Felicia's frozen eyes; and that came out when she tried to save you with that warning note.

"Hale, too, had the utmost horror of your coming to the house. It was he who telephoned you from the Manufacturers' Club, at the very start of things.

"Every inmate of the house was against Mr. Stewart's getting anyone else into his power, even down to that poor, half-demented being in the cellar who, Hale said, escaped one night to rattle your windows, and who was found another night trying to reach you through one of the infernal secret passages with which that eerie place is honeycombed."

"That night," I questioned again, "when Mr. Stewart slept in town?"

"When he was *supposed* to sleep in town," Tony corrected. "He suspected his cellar-hidden accomplice, and it was he who spied on the roof and who, afterward, suffered a pleasant thought which led him to believe that you, perhaps, had the gods with you and that he must search your room. Your closet, too, of course, had a sliding panel. I hope the intricately made old place may be torn down."

I shuddered as I agreed with a fervent "I hope so," and for a moment we were silent.

"It was easy enough to get Alice drunk," Tony said after that quiet interval, "and easy enough, too, it was, to make one of that type think any man in love with her.

"A few flatteries, a little wine, and she suggested that we might as well work together; try some of Stewart's black-mailing on Stewart; so, 'skin' the old man and be the gainers. She pointed out that there was no one left to 'blow' on us. Ditridge, whose warning you was only a small part of the suspicion that Mr. Stewart had seen and felt in him, had been put away, and put away in spite of Felicia's attempt to forestall his murder. Poor Felicia!"

I THOUGHT of the altar in the cupboard and again I shuddered.

"Mr. Stewart's work, of course, and a part of his reign of terror," Tony said that was. "He had his court and how he ruled it! The faded survivor in his cellar was the son of his farmer wo 'died of a stroke'. The boy was used to carry the gems until he 'became ill'.

"I suppose Stewart made fear by a manufactured occult. Ghosts were seen, that sort of thing, when his orders were not obeyed. The boy in the cellar had been reared to a Puritan sort of good and bad and he made the mistake of trying to run away.

"It was Mr. Stewart who took from you the warning the boy poked up through the fireplace that night in the library. He only motored so far as the gates and then his motor went on and he came back."

It was, now, all so obvious! And now, sitting with Tony, so secure, I could consider, and almost calmly, The Shadows, which had been so aptly named. A house which was honeycombed, as Tony had said, with false passages, sliding panels, and chimney-like ladder holding affairs which led from the cellar to almost every room in the house.

And thinking of the square, gray domain, I shivered to think of how the carpet in my room would have been slit had Mr. Stewart, instead of the poor, befuddled boy, cared to enter my sleeping chamber in that manner.

"There were other terrors," I whispered.

"And all of them explained by Miss Janette, Felicia and Hale, who wanted to get you out of the place alive," Tony stated, his voice not quite sure. Then he held me close and I knew, as he had told me before, that he would never forgive himself for having left me to the terrors.

Alice had assured him on her oath that I would not be frightened without a council of which she would be a part and of which she would let him know. He hadn't realized then the jealousy of which she was capable and the fact that he had not quite persuaded her that he was "done" with me.

SO WE sat, watching the faintly leaping flames on our own hearth, thinking: I, of Alice, who would soon be serving a long sentence; of the covered, unused old well where Felicia had hurled the piano key; the well that had, during the thorough investigation which followed the exposé of the crime, given up a body; rather, a skeleton—"A rag, a bone and a hank of hair"—that had once been a warm, living woman; perhaps, it was thought, the woman who had been the wife of Stewart who, it was rumored, had disappeared with a lover and had never again been seen.

Had she seen the beginning of the mania and protested a bit too loudly? Who could tell? A few small things must wait! But most of the story was now explained and certainly a large, sure "Finis" written after it.

I thought, too, secure in my own home and basking in the security, of Ditridge, in the end of whose life I might have had a part. I, who tore his warning across and dropped it to the drive! Perhaps then Mr. Stewart's "blind" eyes had peered at the

tableau from back of one of those black, blank windows?

And I thought of Miss Janette who had disappeared, with Felicia and Hale, during the raid in the cellar of the garage.

"TONY," I asked, "where do you think Felicia and Hale Stewart and Miss Janette are?"

He answered me slowly. "Anne, my dear," he said, "I have a ranch in Wyoming, you know. When we go out there you will meet my new manager and his wife and his mother-in-law. They may remind you of old friends, but when you talk with them you will realize that you never knew them, because this trio will dare, occasionally, to laugh aloud, and I pray that they will, more and more, as life teaches them that they may. Their names are not names you know."

Again we were quiet.

"Perhaps sheltering the weak is bad," Tony went on, "but they all served their sentences and in the most unhappy ways. And I don't know—to add to punishment that has already been too much—I would rather say that Felicia, Hale and Miss Janette Stewart are gone. And they are, really. New souls are growing in their bodies."

Again I sat thinking of the boy in the cellar who is now in a home for the mildly insane, of Mr. Stewart and the gods, of my collection which shall not be dissected, Tony says, but kept to show that gods can be good and exert good influence, and kept under lock and key.

Personally, I shall never like them and I shall always shiver if I must look at them. And I do not need them, for another sort of small god is on my altar now, because I, proved strong and without the taint of "the tragic Belmonts", have dared to marry the man I love.

And this little god swells the mails on February fourteenth; and he wears wings and, although he may not rattle with rubies if he is shaken, this small god is the best god, and Tony Steele and Anne Belmont Steele both know it!

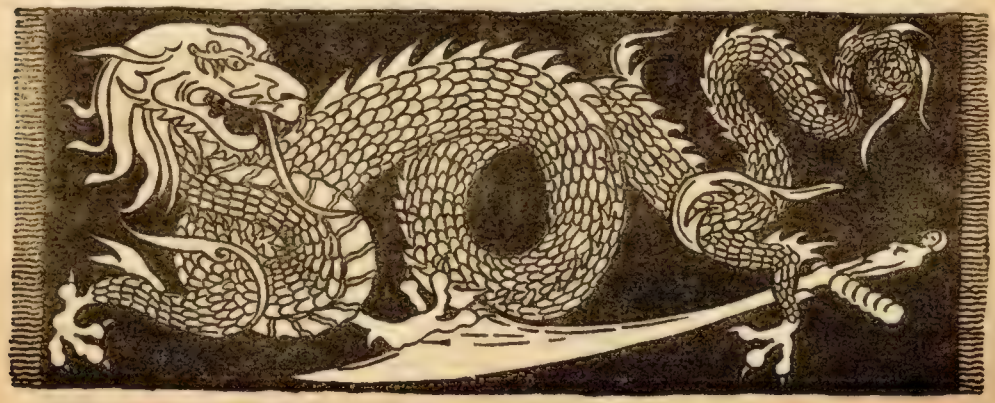
"Tony," I said in the sleepy, slow way in which people speak when their eyes are fixed on a leaping fire, "what was the surprise I was to hear of after the explanation?"

"Oh!" he answered quickly. "It's this. Since the police are through with me and my testimony, and I am again a free man, I think it's time for our honeymoon trip. The Riviera? Old Florence, Rome and the betweens? How about it?"

"Have your way," I answered. "And, Tony, I usually like your way but, strange as it may seem, I haven't even missed that usual trip!"

"Doggone," said Tony, "I haven't either!"

THE END.



Blood for Cargo

By HAYNES TRÉBOR

THE following is extracted from the manuscripts of Amadeo de Diego Miguel Garcia y Becquer, adventurer, gentleman, planter and one-time shipowner:

"The belief, as you know, has persisted in this locality for many generations that the gold and other loot of certain of the greatest and less famous pirates who ravaged the waters hereabouts was buried.

"Although many attempts have been made and information concerning the location of the caches is easily obtainable, no treasure has been found.

"I have myself investigated each likely rumor, and dug with accurate thoroughness in all places where it has been said that the gold could be found—particularly on Massacre Island, along Bayou Coden and Black Dog River, also along Spanish Bay and in the swamps just above the city and other places.

"I have never had the fortune to find the least trace of hidden treasure, and I used the best instruments of divining and witchcraft obtainable. I cannot explain the mystery, for surely much treasure was buried here. I am inclined to credit the ancient statement that gold turns to blood. . . ."

THE HUNCHBACK moved across the cabin, his slow, tangling steps shuffling over the pitched seams of the deck. He shifted about restlessly, like an electric spark endeavoring to leave confinement.

He was not attractive. No hunchbacks are, for that matter, especially when they have been battered about by shifting winds, kicked and trampled by feet at the thousand corners of the earth, burned and bruised by the seven suns, and are still shuffling through existence, accepting cuffing as a gracious part of their lot.

The hair of this man hung raggedly about his head. It was of no particular color, rather like tarnished strands of brittle wire scorched in the heat of a long fire.

His face appeared to be a hideous

mask stuck between the twisted shoulders and capped by the hair. It was scarred and misshapen; the nose had been broken and the lids were cut by a scar on his forehead, leaving an unusually large expanse of lids that squinted over the two narrow slits forming the eyes.

His low, distorted frame was covered with a torn and dirty suit of sail cloth; two rough, unsightly hands and feet protruded in obtrusive unproportionality to the rest of his body. His bare feet did not lift as he walked, but he pushed one forward and dragged the other.

He cackled a tuneless ditty as he set heavy, cracked dishes upon the rough table. He dropped the tableware with a thick clatter, and went shuffling off through the companionway for more, still humming the infernal ditty in his creaky voice.

The ship rolled easily, hardly missing the rhythm enough to make the smoky oil lamp overhead jerk in its swinging.

The hunchback kicked a heavy chair into place beside the table and stopped the ditty long enough to grunt. Then it continued.

FROM up on deck came the creak of blocks and the hum of the stiff breeze through the shrouds and stays. The canvas spread took everything given it, and begged for more. The barefoot sailors pattered over the deck.

From the poop the skipper watched them with one eye, casting the other one, the legendary weather-eye, over the course and up to his canvas.

This "weather-eye" was partly closed by the white scar that crossed the rust on his face from his chin, just missing the corner of his thin, shapeless lips, on up across his face and over his eye.

It was not necessary for him to squint that eye, as the scar made the effect continuous.

Occasionally he gave a command and the answer came back in a singsong "Aye, aye, sir!" as the seamen carried it out.

He was rather squat, this man, so much so, in fact, that his baggy breeches seemed much too large for him. Beneath the breeches showed a pair of dirty stockings, covering stocky legs.

His shirt showed that it had long lost the dignity of being fastened in front and, instead, was ripped to his waist in such a way that the wind was continually trying to blow the loose folds over the handle of the knife stuck in his girdle.

The lookout up aloft sang out:

"A sail, sir—to starb'd!"

The man moved to the rail and put his glass to his large eye. He scanned the distant sky-line and took the glass down. The "weather-eye" cocked toward the lookout.

"What is she? Can ye make her out?"

"No, sir. But I think she's a schooner, sir!"

The man spoke an order and then turned to the man at the wheel. "Let her have it a few points," he said.

The helmsman nodded. "Let her have it a few points, sir."

IT WAS late afternoon and the schooner they had sighted was coming from where the sun was making port. A heavy swell was running but not a bit of white foam broke on the surface.

The sea was burnished with a dull yellow tone which here and there glistened and turned into a deeper red. It was as if some master had poured molten gold instead of oil into the sea to quiet turbulent waters.

The sight pleased the man who stood watching his vessel plow sturdily through it. He liked to think of the sea as full of the precious, coveted metal. He smiled to himself and his

eyes twinkled with anticipation and good humor.

He did not see the eyes that watched him, as he stood gazing at the now visible sail—blood-shot, quick shifting yet dull, they were; fierce, cunning, hate-filled eyes that saw without reason; thirsty eyes with carefully guarded glances.

The work on deck went on; sand was sprinkled about, the netting hung alongside to prevent their being boarded should the prey prove too formidable.

The hunchback's head appeared in the companionway. "I begs ye pardon, sir, but will ye have mess?"

The man glanced at the horizon, nodded; the head disappeared.

"Mr. Donald!"

The mate saluted, backed to the rail and propped himself against it.

"Yes, sir," he answered stolidly.

"Mr. Donald, I'm goin' to have my supper. Will ye have a look at that vessel over yonder—don't expose us until ye're certain. Ye understand. If anything happens, send for me."

"Very well, sir."

The mate watched the back of the man as he went below, and smiled absently to himself. Then he fell to watching the sea.

IN THE cabin the hunchback shuffled back and forth, pushing one foot, dragging the other, placing food upon the table.

The man dropped into a chair before the table and the hunchback pushed the dishes in front of him. Dishing out generous quantities, the man ate heavily and noisily.

"Ye'll like some grog with ye mess, sir?" The hunchback stood waiting the answer.

"Grog is for fo'c's'le hands," the man replied with a quick smile. "We'll have whisky—good whisky, lad. Fetch us a bottle and ye can serve the men some extra grog after we've finished with that schooner we've just sighted."

"Aye, sir." The hunchback went out and returned with a bottle of whisky, setting it before the man. He poured out a mugful and drank it.

Then the hunchback spoke:

"Ye expect we'll bag another merchantman by tonight, sir?"

"I expect so," was the answer. "If she's rich we'll put into port and let the men spend their share on the women and wine shops in Spanish Alley. The men like to have their little pleasures with their share."

"Of the gold, sir?"

The man poured another mugful of whisky and drank it with gurgling swallows. He set the mug down with a thud and leaned back in his chair. His eyes were narrowed reflectively and he chuckled.

The hunchback stuck a thick tongue in the corner of his mouth and watched him.

"D'ye think there'll be much of a fight, sir? I hate the smell of blood like it was that last time. Something fierce, it was, and poor little Scuvvy Hawkins was killed, too—run right through the neck with a cutlass. I always liked him, sir."

The man shot a quick glance at the hunchback from the corner of his eye and nodded slowly.

"He was, lad. A likely chap. But that's the way a man who's out looking for fortune has to expect things. Gold's for them what can get it."

"But it's kinda sad, ain't it now?"

A laugh. "Sad? When there's a ship load of gold to be had by it? That's what makes gold so valuable—men are willing to die for it."

The man shrugged. "So long as ye get the gold, what's the odds?"

"Still it does seem sort of shameful, sir."

The tongue shifted to the other side. "I always remembers the blood,

and—and the hard feelin's gold's likely to bring. I've heard it said, sir, that gold is likely to turn to blood."

For an instant an angry gleam crossed the face of the man; then it vanished and he smiled grimly.

"Ye don't have cause to worry, lad," he said. "It's gold that buys what ye want in Spanish Alley, ain't it? Right. And it's gold that makes a man a gentleman with satin breeches and niggers to wait on him. And when ye can get ship loads of it, bully, ship loads of rich treasure what ye can hide from the spyin' eyes of them"—he jerked a thumb toward the fo'c's'le—"ah, then——"

The hunchback nodded respectfully. "I reckon ye're right, sir. Only—I've been wonderin' about the—other."

He shuffled out, carrying a pile of dirty dishes. He began the sea ditty again. The man looked after him curiously.

IT WAS night and the black murkiness that clung close to the sea hid the crime.

Bare feet pattered about the deck; a coarse voice broke in frequently. There came the whine of rope through the blocks, the flap of canvas and the knocking and grinding as the small boats grated alongside. Voices, the creak of the davits——

Two seamen, straining under its weight, carried a chest into the cabin and dropped it in a corner.

The hunchback, cracking his great bony knuckles, crossed the cabin and stood beside it, looking down at the chest. For a moment he stood there; then he kicked the chest with his foot, grunted, and went on deck.

The man was slightly drunk. His stocky legs wobbled as he came into the cabin and inspected the chest. He pried open the lock and reached his hands into the gold. Hearing a step he quickly closed the lid and turned.

Mr. Donald, the mate, came in and saluted in the stolid way he had.

"All off, sir," he announced.

The "weather-eye" squinted at the mate with scant steadiness.

"Ye've got everything off the schooner?" the man said thickly.

"All her cargo worth takin' stored below. Everything else off of her, sir, except a few dead men we had to knife gettin' aboard o' her."

The man made a faint gesture of dismissal. "All right, Mr. Donald. Fire her and clear away. You can tend to the details."

The mate wagged his smug face up and down knowingly. The man glared at him, his eyes glowering impatiently.

"Well?"

The chest of yellow gold lay in the corner and the man's voice rang with impatience.

"What shall I do with the persons we took off the schooner?" Mr. Donald wanted to know.

He even raised one brow quizzically. "There're twelve, all told, sir, from the crew."

A second's reflection, followed by an amiable smile. The man touched the mate familiarly on the shoulder, swaying perilously back and forth.

"Send them below," he said. "We'll set them adrift later—better save one of the boats—so that the tide will take them ashore somewhere. Give the poor devils a chance."

"And there's a woman, sir. Wife of the captain," Mr. Donald said.

The thin lips parted. "A woman!"

The "weather-eye" blinked. "A *woman* did ye say, Mr. Donald?"

"Precisely, sir."

A PAUSE. The man poured another mug of whisky and drank it.

"Will ye bring her here, Mr. Donald?"

The mate hovered on the spot without taking his eyes from the man.

"I'm afraid there'll be trouble with the captives," he said quietly.

The other flared and he swore savagely.

"Then heave them overboard or tie them to the masts. Bring the woman to me."

Suddenly Mr. Donald's eyes brightened eagerly and he bent forward.

"I'm thinking, sir. That woman is booty like them cases of merchandise an' that chest o' gold there. Ain't she?

"Well, as it's all booty an' we go share and share in the divvy, I thought maybe ye wouldn't mind takin' my share o' the gold an' lettin' me have this woman. Or I'll throw knives at ten paces, sir."

The lips of the man twitched before breaking into a sneer. Then he laughed coarsely; a menacing note entered his voice.

"You got a lot o' nerve imagining such things, Mr. Donald. Ye're thinkin' too freely. D'ye think ye're givin' orders on board my ship?"

"Certainly not, sir," was the answer with almost threatening stolidness. "I beg your pardon."

"Don't ye have no concern about yer share o' the gold either. I'll divvy that and decide what's yer share, d'ye understand?" Mr. Donald assented silently.

"And I asked ye to bring the woman here, didn't I?"

"Ye did, sir."

"Ye don't plan mutiny o me, d'ye, Mr. Donald?"

The scar showed very distinctly on the face pushed close to the mate's.

Mr. Donald shrugged impassively and turned away as the white heat of anger flooded his face.

"Very well, sir," he answered, and went on deck.

A moment later the hunchback returned, mumbling thoughtfully to himself. He sat down on top of the gold chest and examined the hideous knuckles. Finally he looked up at the man.

"Did ye see the woman we took off that schooner, sir? She's up on deck now; looks as frightened as a gull caught in a net. She's kinda young an' pretty, too. Pitiful, I thinks. The poor thing."

He sighed and rose. "Well, sir, it's too bad, ain't it? And I've always heard it said, too, sir, that spilling a lady's blood is bad luck——"

The man interrupted with a mighty oath and, a second later, a knife quivered in the wall beside the door through which the hunchback had gone.

THE BARE backs of the men at the oars glistened with perspiration beneath the hot sun. The boat cut the low, easy ground swells, rising and falling gently. The oars dipped and creaked and brought forth snatches of song.

Upon the chest placed in the stern the man sat, his massive shoulders lifting and sagging with the movement of the boat. He peered ahead at the white strip of beach, his "weather-eye" entirely closed and the other one nearly so from the glare of the sun upon the water.

The boat grounded and, as another breaker lifted it, two seamen shipped their oars and leaped out, pulling it up on the beach. The man sat still until the boat was well beached and then got out.

The two sailors lifted the chest and placed it upon the yellow sand. The man waited in a sullen silence, apparently slightly annoyed with the heat, until a pick and a shovel were brought and laid beside the chest.

Climbing over the gunwale, the hunchback shuffled over to the man.

"Could I be any assistance to ye, sir?" he asked politely.

Narrowed eyes regarded him.

"Yes," the man answered agreeably. "Carry that pick and shovel and see if you can keep up with me."

The hunchback took up the instruments and moved ahead a little piece. Looking over the men scattered about the boat on the beach, the man continued:

"And ye, bullies, belay and stand by here until I come back. If I catch any of ye sneakin' around behind me, I'll make it unpleasant enough. Ye mark me!"

Nods. Convincing enough. Heads wagging in the sun like pendulums of run-down clocks that have been disturbed. Those that were shaken most wagged longest, the rest stopping abruptly after one or two nods.

Mute faces, lowered slightly as protection against the sun's rays, and squinted eyes raised—then dropped, to be raised again only a little, in a guarded carelessness, as the boat's crew watched the man struggle with the heavy chest.

He lifted it unaided to his great shoulders and staggered across the stretch of sand with it, followed by the hunchback. The faces remained lowered, but the eyes stared with the frankness of the burning sun overhead.

The men sat there on the sand, blackening in the fierceness of the heat, silent, and watching the retreating leader.

FOR half an hour the man toiled under the heavy load, breathing heavily and cursing the uneven ground and the beads of sweat that trickled into his eyes.

Finally he stopped and dropped the chest to the ground and sat on it until his hairy chest had ceased its heaving from his panting.

Taking the pick from the hunchback, the man began driving into the ground. The hunchback looked on in silence—then:

"Can't I help ye in some way, sir?"

The man growled at him under his breath.

"Yes, if ye'll keep that infernal mouth of yours lashed down," he retorted.

The dirt loosened, the man applied the shovel and threw the earth to one side. The hole deepened.

"It's sorter warm, ain't it?" the hunchback suggested.

The man only swore in a gluttural murmur and continued digging. The heavy box was fitted into the hole he had dug.

"Ye know, sir," the hunchback went on, "I often think about that woman we took off that schooner. She was certainly a pretty thing and so pitiful like. Seems like it was a shame, her being so young, too."

The scar twitched with menacing fury and glaring eyes glanced at him with sinister warning.

"It seems to me them sharks quit following us mighty sudden and I didn't see that woman on board no more." He shook his head in sad meditation.

"Looks like an awful lot of blood to be spilled over a chest o' gold, an' it bein' a woman, too. A witcher-woman in Jamaica told me once, sir, that gold turns to blood and runs back into the sea."

The long fingers of the man moved over the handle of the pick. The pick rose; it fell heavily, quivered and sagged with the new weight, and then came up, bloody. . . .

A MUTINY can happen with irrevocable swiftness. A week or two had gone by since the skipper had returned to his waiting crew there on the beach and ordered the vessel put to sea again. He had made no explanation of the absence of the hunchback; perhaps none had been necessary.

And now Mr. Donald, the mate, stood on the poop talking with Tkule, the man at the wheel.

"How have the boys up for'rd taken to our little talk," he asked suddenly.

The helmsman spat and shifted his quid.

"The boys all feel as ye does, sir. They ain't overly fond of the skipper. Even Mike, what's cabin boy since the hunchback's been gone, says the skipper is gettin' too fussy for him—a-cussin' about his likker."

The mate nodded agreement. "He's been drivin' the men kinder hard of late. He's gettin' to be a mighty inconsiderate man, I think, Tkule."

The man at the wheel again wagged his head. "Right, sir. The men are somewhat discontented. They think the ship is bein'—bein'—well, sir, the men are naturally superstitious, and they thinks women on board a pirate vessel ain't good luck."

"Women?" asked Mr. Donald.

"So, sir; they didn't like the hunchback, but he wasn't so worse. But the skipper has had three women on board. There was that lady from the schooner—the last vessel we took before he went ashore with the hunchback. And then he brought aboard a woman from Spanish Alley over in Mobile; and last week there was one of the passengers on that English vessel—the others all managed to kill themselves. Them women he brought aboard ain't here now. He killed the hunchback, too."

"Lots of men what sails under the black flag have killed men they took with them when they went to hide the loot—the gold," the mate said.

"Rightly, sir. Only since then it seems like the ship ain't been havin' no good luck. Several of the men up for'rd been complainin' with pains and Svensen, the Swede, and Peters died awfully sudden." Tkule's brows were drawn thoughtfully.

"And besides, sir," he continued, "a charmer woman in Jamaica told me that gold what's got by killin' a hunchback or a woman most always turns to blood and brings evil luck onto a ship."

Mr. Donald scoffed. "Fo'c's'le talk, my boy. It ain't no bad luck here, it's the skipper."

"The men ain't feelin' that he's been doing right by them," Tkule put in. "They wants more of the loot. They say that the skipper is keepin' more'n his share."

"Just what I said about the skipper. You remember my little talk. He's buryin' the best loot and ain't nobody but him knows where it's hid. The men ain't gettin' their rightful share."

The mate fell to watching the canvas for a moment. "Me and you have our understandin', haven't we, Tkule? Eh? Right. And it'll be share and share when we're runnin' things, won't it, bully?"

A sly grin spread across the man Tkule's face and there was a chuckle from the stolid way of the mate.

"The boys will be ready for yer signal, sir," Tkule said.

"And we'll just keep our agreement confidential, Tkule. The men don't talk so free around officers and ye can keep yer ear cocked for any talk behind my back."

Mr. Donald grinned knowingly. "And this ain't mutiny we're pullin'. No, sir, it ain't. But we like to have our shares of the loot to spend on the things we like when we feel like it."

The lookout called down to the deck. "Sail to port, sir!"

A moment later the skipper, having heard the lookout's cry, appear on the deck. The man at the wheel smiled sagaciously as the mate moved forward.

The skipper came upon the poop and glanced at the distant sail. For a moment Mr. Donald stood looking

at his squat form with what might have been amused interest.

"Will ye change yer course and make for that sail, Mr. Donald?" the skipper said. "Take the usual precautions until yer sure what yer're up against."

THE MATE confronted the skipper. Some of the men on watch moved up the companion ladder to which the skipper's back was turned; they waited curiously.

"I beg yer pardon, sir," Mr. Donald said quietly. "But I'd like to have a sort of understanding before I asks the men to put after that vessel yonder."

"Understanding?" The man flamed. "What d'ye mean, Mr. Donald?"

"The men would like to know how the loot—and the gold, if we get any—from that vessel is goin' to be divvied. They feel that there ain't been an equal division in the past."

Three or four seamen had crept up to the top of the companion and stood on the poop, silently regarding the scene.

The man's eyes narrowed angrily and a sneer curled his thin lips. "Have ye turned a rotten sea lawyer?" he said.

The mate raised his hand languidly to his chin a second before the skipper made for him with a savage lunge.

In another instant a sailor leaped forward and a belaying pin crashed with a mighty force on the skull of the squat man with the massive shoulders and the squinting "weather-eye."

A half dozen others bounced upon the body of the skipper as it toppled to the deck, lifted him high in the air and then tossed him into the sea.

In the afternoon sun the sea was as burnished gold. Mr. Donald gave the order to make for the vessel on the horizon; standing at the quarter deck rail he watched his vessel plow through the sea toward it. . . .

THREE ships fell prey to the pirate vessel during the following fortnight; two of them were carrying gold. The other was rich in merchandise.

Mr. Donald had the vessel put in to shore and the merchandise disposed of, cutting the moneys from the sale among the crew. There was a week of gambling, heavy drinking and hectic, ribald nights in Spanish Alley.

When their money was gone the men suggested that their leader divvy up the gold from the chests, but he refused. Money from the common loot was enough for ordinary pleasures; save the gold until there was enough so that every man's son of them could go ashore rich as a landowner, he argued; a few more ships. . . .

Sullenly the men agreed, and they put to sea again.

MIKE, who was cabin boy, came on the poop where the man Tkule was again standing the watch at the wheel. The day was sultry and Mike said he wanted to get a breath of fresh air. He found a coil of rope and made himself comfortable nearby.

"How's the skipper?" Tkule asked offhand.

"Oh, him!" replied the cabin boy. "He's as cocky as the other skipper. Lord, sometimes I think he's worse. I reckon the men ain't goin' to vote Mr. Donald no more pop'lar than they did the other, neither."

"Why, what's wrong, Mike?" Tkule wanted to know.

"Well, I been hearin' a little talk now and here. Scalley, that big Irishman, has been going 'round 'mong the men."

"Has he now!" the helmsman said.

Mike's head wagged. "A lot of the men has been mutterin'. Ye know,

Mr. Donald has been the skipper of this vessel for two months or so now and we ain't seen no gold yet, other than a few coins from selling merchandise.

"He keeps promising but the men don't trust no promises. 'Wait until we bag a couple more ships so's there'll be a king's ransom to divide,' he keeps sayin'.

"But the men think there's enough already. Scalley, what's been talkin', says the skipper's just tryin' to cross them like the other one did."

"Is there mutiny being planned?" Tkule's eyes opened inquiringly, and he regarded the other intently.

"Well, I ain't sayin' but what there mightn't be such," Mike answered. "Thompson says that he knows about where the skipper went with the hunchback and he can locate the spot where the gold was buried."

Tkule's glance became sharper. "Thompson claims that, does he? If yer sure, I reckon ye can count on me, bully boy. Mr. Donald ain't been actin' above suspicion and I'm thinkin' the men won't never see their share of that gold. Share and share, he says. Ha, that's the yarn all of them tell, Mike."

The man Tkule sighed heavily and threw the wheel hard over to catch a head of breeze.

WHEN about an hour later Mr. Donald appeared on deck, Tkule beckoned to him anxiously.

"There's trouble brewin', sir," he said. "The men are sort of skiddish and ain't trustin' ye. Mike has been talkin' to me and he says the men think ye're goin' to cross them, the way ye been puttin' them off by not dividing the gold, and they think ye ought to go dig up the stuff the old man hid away and divvy it all."

Mr. Donald chuckled in his stolid way. "So they're thinking of mutiny, are they?"

Tkule spat. "They ain't up to that yet, I don't think, sir. But Scalley has been talkin' among them and tellin' them ye ain't treatin' them no fairer than the other skipper an' they've started grumblin'. Claim they ain't gettin' share an' share alike as ye promised."

Mr. Donald smiled appreciatively. "Right ye are, too, Tkule. They ain't, 'cause the share and share is for *us*—ye and me, it's for. We don't have to share nothing with them."

"I knew ye had plans like that," Tkule responded.

"Ye're sure ye can find the spot where ye saw the skipper kill the hunchback, ain't ye?"

"I could most find it with my eyes shut."

"And he had the chest in a hole right by, didn't he?"

"Yes, sir. There was a sort o' stream, a bayou sort of thing running about ten paces from where he put the pick in the hunchback's skull, an' between that and the spot where he killed him there was a hole with the chest already in it."

"Fine. I think we'll be leaving the ship tonight," Mr. Donald said thoughtfully.

"At mid-sea, sir?" the man Tkule asked in surprise.

"Right. Only we're not so far from land as ye'd imagine. I changed the course slightly without makin' it generally known and there's land just behind the horizon to the west there."

The other raised his eyes quizzically. "But the men, sir."

"Serve extra liquor tonight and get them drunker'n a gang of aristocrats. Then we'll slip quietly away in a boat I've carefully fitted out. There ain't a good navigator in the crew. The tide will take them away from shore and this wind will hold them off for a while."

"Ye're right clever, sir."

WITHIN a month the words "It's gone!" were muttered in a dry, hoarse, frightened voice—twice at the same spot.

AN ALLIGATOR lay on the dark sand sunning, the tip of his bony, ridged tail in the muddy water of the bayou. He opened his eyes warily as he heard the crashing of some animal through the undergrowth and when the sound came nearer he slipped back into the water. From beneath the submerged roots of a tree he watched the two men approach.

It was a torrid day, odorous steam rising from the ground. The two men were perspiring freely. Between them they carried a pick and a shovel, which they dropped when one of them paused near the bank of the bayou and made a motion with his hand.

"This is the spot," the man Tkule said. "Right there the skipper killed the hunchback and he had his hole right here."

Mr. Donald licked his burning lips anxiously.

"Ye're sure, are ye, Tkule?"

"Positive, sir. I hid right behind them trees yonder and watched him."

Mr. Donald's chuckle was less stolid; it was almost feverish.

"There's gold here to pay a king's ransom, Tkule," he gloated. "And all ours, every clinkin' yellow piece of it. Come, we'll start digging. . . ."

The drowsing alligator watched the men work for some minutes. After a while they began digging in a different spot; finally they began driving the pick deeply into the earth in various places.

There was a frown on Mr. Donald's face. The man Tkule mopped his glistening brow frequently and wet his lips nervously. There were words spoken, tense, angry words, oath-spiced, more and more bitter and threatening.

Finally, Mr. Donald straightened up and faced his companion. His eyes blazed from between snarling brows.

"Where's the gold ye said was buried here, Tkule?" he said menacingly.

Tkule blinked. "I don't know, sir. This is the place where the skipper killed the hunchback and buried it."

"Ye're a stinkin' liar, Tkule. Ye been crossing me."

"I ain't, sir. I swear this is the place."

"Then where's the gold?" Mr. Donald said.

"It's—it's gone," the man Tkule answered.

Mr. Donald's lips twitched into a sneer and his fingers went to his waist and touched the handle of his knife.

The alligator stuck one eye out of the water to see better. The two men struggled on the sand, trampled the ground where they had been digging, swaying and lurching with the uneven footing.

One hand of Mr. Donald's was grasping that of Tkule's which held a knife over his shoulder. The other hand strained in a fierce effort to sink his own blade into the stomach of his opponent.

The blade moved steadily closer and the look on Tkule's face was one of desperate anguish.

Suddenly Mr. Donald gave his knife a quick lunge, driving it into the body of the swaying Tkule. As he did, his foot sank into a hole but recently made by the pick and in the soft dirt Mr. Donald lost his balance.

The sagging body of Tkule fell heavily against him and he toppled backward, crashing to the ground. The hand of Tkule that held his knife was still at Mr. Donald's shoulder and when the two fell in a heap, Tkule on top, the sharp blade penetrated the base of the former mate's neck.

The alligator lay sunning, gazing at a pick and a shovel glistening in the sun. The reptile's sides bulged with over-eating; his tail moved sluggishly back and forth in the water.

IT TOOK several days for the men to spend the gold they had on board in the Spanish Alley resorts; when it was gone they decided to seek the stuff buried with the hunchback.

Thompson was not quite sure of his bearings and several hours of the afternoon were wasted in searching. It was a sour, mumbling, half drunk crew that followed him about. Scalley kept up a continual nagging, making irksome, insinuating remarks.

The men were tired, impatient; every few minutes a fight would break out. Most of the time it ended in a verbal battle, but occasionally two men would be tussling on the ground.

It was night when Thompson came upon a place which looked familiar. His shouts brought his companions to the spot and there was a mêlée of trampling about and excited jabbering. Finally, Scalley restored something like order.

"Is this the place where the skipper put away his loot?" he demanded.

Thompson nodded vigorously. "It was right here. I know." His foot kicked something and, stooping, he picked up a rusted pick. A coarse shout went up when he held it before the men. "See there, I told ye, didn't I?"

"The lad's right," a sailor cried.

Scalley smiled quietly. "We'll dig first and then see what happens."

THE MEN were in each other's way in their anxiety to dig, but after half an hour the ardor had lessened. When nothing had been found the muttering increased.

Finally, they gathered about Thompson. He, poor wretch, stood nervously before their gaze, glancing furtively into the murky darkness of the surrounding swamp. A bull alligator bellowed somewhere in the distance.

Scalley moved forward. "Where's the gold?" he said.

"This is the place. Maybe we ain't dug deep enough. I didn't see the skipper bury the stuff—I only saw him kill the hunchback. But he had a hole dug right here, ready for the chest, when he spiked the hunchback."

"I believe ye're lying," Scalley said coldly.

"I swear I ain't. This is the spot."

"Then where's the loot?"

Thompson flung his arms out in desperate appeal. "It's—it's gone," he said limply.

Scalley laughed sardonically. "And I reckon ye know where its gone to, ye shark." A dozen brutal laughs echoed through the swamp.

Thompson attempted to back away but found himself hemmed in. He stood facing the hard eyes of Scalley.

"I think ye crossed us," the leader said. "Ye goin' to tell us where the stuff is?"

"This is the spot," Thompson persisted.

Mike moved through the group and came beside Scalley. He held out a handful of dirt in front of a lantern so that Scalley could see. The sand was a dark brown.

"There's blood stains on that sand, sir," Mike said. "Maybe that's the hunchback's blood."

"If it is, Thompson is crossing us," Scalley answered. "And if it ain't, he lied to us."

"I've heard it said, sir, that charmer women claims that gold turns to blood——"

Scalley laughed derisively. "Anyways, I think we ought to mark this

spot with *somebody's* blood so we'll know where the skipper laid his loot away."

The pearl handle of Scalley's knife stuck impressively from Thompson's ribs as he lay on the sand. Blood trickled to the ground. . . .

"NOT LONG ago I acquired in Spanish Alley, once the rendezvous of pirates, criminals, and other notorious persons on the Gulf, an old manuscript said to have been the personal log or diary of a well-known pirate. In it I find this passage:

" 'On August 21st I went ashore with a chest heavy with gold. As I wish none of my crew to know where I bury my gold I bade them wait on the beach while I, carrying the chest, and with the hunchback I had as a cabin boy carrying digging tools, went into the swamp some distance from the shore. There I was preparing to bury my treasure when I was forced to put an end to the mouthing of the hunchback by driving the pick into his skull.

" 'Although I had already dug a sufficient hole, I was afraid to bury my gold on the spot as I have heard it said that the blood of a hunchback casts evil spells on treasure. So I paced fifty yards from that spot and there hid my gold. . . .

"The diary gives no information concerning the location of either spot." (From the manuscripts of Amadeo de Diego Miguel Garcia y Becquer.)

Moon Superstitions

COUNT your money at the time of the new moon and your purse will always be full. Change your residence at this time and you'll have plenty and to spare.

It is unlucky to look at the new moon through glass or trees. If one member of the family die at the time of the new moon, you may look for three more deaths to follow.

Cut your nails on new moon night and you'll have luck.

Do not sleep in the moonlight, it may cause blindness or lunacy.

Fine weather may be expected when you see the new moon in the arms of the old one. A circle about the moon foretells rain.

Pie Face

By PAUL SAND

"THIS," said Spike, as the two of us rested our horses at the top of the rise that leads into Scratch Valley, "this reminds me of the trail I hit, after me and Pigger Morton cleaned out the bank over at Avalon. Jes' the same kind o' country, same God-forsaken stretch o' weeds an' kindlin' wood, an' nary a soul for twenty-thirty mile."

"They got you for that Avalon job, didn't they?"

"Yeah, they got me, but it was funny. We took cover for the day, an' Pigger, he double-crossed me. Sneaked away with all the swag while I was sleepin'."

"Yeah?"

"You shoulda heard me cuss that skunk out, Joe! But I laughed later. They caught both of us. The goods got him three years. They weren't so sure o' me, and I got off with six months for lack of evidence. I swore I'd get even with that joker if I ever got the chance, and, by gee, I will! But I had a grand haw-haw when they slipped him three years!"

Spike laughed a big horse-laugh and his white teeth gleamed from under his dirty mustache. I thought—and it wasn't the first time—that he sure must have been a mean customer to back into a corner in the days when he was running wild.

To see him off a ways, you'd never guess how big he was, he was so well built; but close up you realized he was as big as two men. Crusty black boots, big black hat, heavy black vest hanging open, he was still a "Bad Man" in looks. Muscle and speed and nerve stuck out all over him.

"Spike," I put in, following up a subject I had been curious about ever since I'd begun to realize that the yarns he liked to string me with at

Mother Butts' hashhouse were actually true, "whatever cured you of the stick-up game? Was it a lady, or the zip some o' these deputies are showin', or jes' good sense?"

"Well, Joe," he said slowly, as if he was trying to think, "to put it straight, I don't hardly know. It warn't a lady, and it warn't bein' scared by the buzzer-boys, not by a jugful! It may be, as you say, jes' good sense."

"But what give you the good sense? It don't grow on bushes."

"I wondered that myself, Joe, lots o' times. An' finally I figger it's jes' the people y' meet."

"The people you meet?"

"'At's it. In this game there's fellers like you an' Pete an' Mother Butts an' her ol' man—nothin' startlin', o' course, but good, white folks.

"An' how about the other game? You either gotta go it alone, or you gotta tie up with birds like Mush Moonhouse, or Red River Schultze, or low-down, snivelin', hop-h e a d e d skunks like Pigger Morton!

"Nuh! I'm gettin' old, I reckon, but gimme a square game an' good folks to range with. You ain't got no notion how lonesome a good man is in a crooked game!"

AS WE picked our way along through the splintery brush, a slight movement in the grass some way head of us caught Spike's keen eye.

"What kind of animule do you reckon that is snoopin' across our trail?"

I watched and, judging from the evidence, it might have been anything from a rat to a wolf.

"Maybe we can stir it up a bit," said Spike, whipping out his gun and letting fly a shot where he judged it to be.

The next minute was one of the most surprised I ever put in. Spike looked just about the way I felt. His shot was answered by a noise the like of which I never heard in such a place.

It was a raspy wail that sounded more like a young sawmill than anything else. If it had been night, I reckon my blood would have near frozen! I'd heard coyotes and wolves make some queer howls, but nothing exactly like we heard in the stillness of Scratch Valley.

Spike grunted and cursed under his breath. Jabbing his horse, he hurled and scrambled through the brush on the bee-line his bullet has taken. I followed. He slowed down and leaned over to squint around in the rough. He gave a funny gasp and jumped off his horse.

I came up and my jaw dropped loose! In the grass was a baby—a human baby—yelling its head off! And it had some excuse. Its left leg was bleeding bad.

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" muttered Spike, ripping off his bandana and winding it around the kid's leg just below the knee. "Can y' beat it? A real kid! Out here! I'll laugh when I wake up!"

He felt cautiously down the baby's shank. "Bone's all right. Jest a scratch." But the baby, not realizing Spike was squeezing its leg for its own good, yelled louder than ever.

"Shut up, you pie-faced little runt!" growled Spike. "You'll wake the neighbors!"

THE "pie-faced little runt" wasn't any beauty, for a fact. Being a he-child, you could make some allowances. It was pug-nosed and dirty and skinny.

I am no hand at guessing kids' ages, but this one couldn't have been more than two. It didn't have anything on but a shirt that looked like it might have been cut down from one of Spike's.

Its skin was tanned a color that was healthy enough, but its bones

stuck out sharp and gave it the look of the last rosebush of summer. The only flesh on it seemed to be the thin muscles it moved its arms and legs with. And, oh, yes, it had good lung muscles, too!

Spike grinned at it as he wiped some of the blood and dirt off its leg, and it stopped its bawling for a minute at the impressive sight of Spike's face, close up.

"Joe, where in the name of all the jumpin' frogs of Jerusalem did this kid come from? Never was a doggone soul lived in Scratch Valley I know of."

"Some camper's kid, maybe."

"Never heard o' anybody but rustlers and high-jackers campin' places like Scratch Valley. 'Course, there may be—fact is, there's gotta be somebody around. Kids don't grow on huckleberry bushes."

Spike turned roughly to the youngster.

"Hey! Where y' live?"

His grin took some of the bite out of the words, and instead of starting to bawl again, the kid barked back at him; but there was nothing you could understand out of the yelp.

"Attaboy, Pie Face!" chuckled Spike, "but it don't get us nowhere. And if we don't find your folks an' get this leg o' yourn fixed up, you gonna be in a bad way. Which way d'you come?"

Spike straightened up and looked around.

"Most likely downhill," I suggested.

"Nary sign o' smoke or shack or nothin'," growled Spike, picking the kid up by the middle and swinging up into the saddle. "Let's give 'em a whoop."

His thundering "Yaw-ho-ooo!" brought no answer but broken echoes, and repeating it eight or ten times did nothing but scare the kid into bawling afresh.

"Shut yer trap, Pie Face," snapped Spike, "if y' got nothin' better'n that to say! Let's beat around, Joe, for a trail. Maybe he fell off a wagon or somethin', or maybe somebody was jest aimin' to lose him."

WE HIT off at different angles up the rough slope. In less than a hundred feet I jerked my pinto so sharp he reared. Just underneath was a woman in a faded, patched, mud-smeared calico dress, lying face down in the weeds!

I yelled to Spike and slid off the pinto. If the kid was skinny, the woman was a skeleton. Her face was drawn and pasty-like, her thin hair screwed up in a knot, her hands like long bundles of pipe-stems. And she was dead.

"Well, kid," grumpled Spike, not as rough as usual, "we found yer maw, but it ain't gonna do you much good. Looks like she starved to death, Joe. No marks, is there?"

There was no kind of injury, as far as I could see. Her bare ankles had been scratched considerable above her split shoes, but that was all. In the pocket of her flimsy dress was an old rag with four dollars and seventy-six cents tied up in it.

"Thought so," said Spike. "Can't eat money. Maybe the kid here is hungry. How 'bout it, Pie Face? Joe's got some store crackers on his saddle. Like one?"

"Pie Face" went after the cracker like a starved wolf.

"Still, we don't know much more'n we did before," mused Spike. "What was yer maw doin' so ding far from anywheres? This here is a sort o' trail, ain't it, Joe? She must 'a' been goin' that way when she flopped."

"Maybe we can follow it back."

We picked our way along over rocks and fallen trees and tangled brush. Before we went a mile, we lost even what looked like a trail, but kept on in the same general direction

up the valley. Suddenly Spike pulled up.

"Ain't that a shack or somethin' up there in that draw?" he pointed.

"Looks like it, for a fact."

WE WORKED toward it and ran into a plain trail that twisted right up to a shack under a scraggly pine. It was falling to pieces, one side propped up bodily with an old post.

Inside and out it was just about what you'd expect it to be. A rusty stove sat in a heap of its own ashes. A once fancy iron bed slumped in one corner, a frayed blanket trailing on the dirt floor. A coffee-pot with no handle, a greasy frying-pan, a battered dipper, and two galvanized iron buckets lay around convenient.

Out under the pine tree were a lot of empty tin cans—soup, beans, sardines, tomatoes, milk, molasses—and some old, rusty, cooking junk.

Spike scratched his head.

"Here's home sweet home, Pie Face. Your maw's gone, and I don't see no sign o' your paw, and you got a nasty hole in one leg. What d'ye think, Joe? Better call it a day an' get back to town with the kid. It would plumb certain have died where it was, but pluggin' it the way I did, I sort o' feel I owe it somethin'."

WE CARRIED "Pie Face" in, dosing him with water and crackers. He bawled when his leg hurt, and once or twice dropped off in Spike's arm like he was asleep or unconscious. We hustled him to Mother Butts.

"The pore little skin-bones!" she crooned, laying "Pie Face" on a pile of clothes, and thumping around the kitchen to heat some milk and get some brown grease, which she smeared on his leg. She bandaged it up and fed him milk out of a spoon.

"I got some old things o' my Bud's that'll fit him right good. The pore kid! Such a cutey, even if he ain't got much nachel beauty. Somethin' t'eat and maybe a wash after a while won't hurt him none."

Spike grinned down at the puzzled but greedy youngster.

"Pie Face, if you'll trust Mother to look after you a spell, I'll slide over to the store an' phone the county seat an' see if anybody knows yer paw or any o' yer kinfolks."

That mystery was cleared up before dark. The sheriff went out and recognized the woman as soon as he saw her.

"Name's Mary Hister," Spike reported. "Jake Hister's woman that was killed when his horse threw him under the train over Torrestown coupla weeks ago. Used to live over San Beneo way, but seems they pulled up stakes for Scratch Valley, so no wonder they couldn't locate his wife nowhere."

"You didn't say nothin' about the kid?"

"No, I didn't, Joe. I got to thinkin' about Pie Face. Y' know, Joe, I sorta taken a likin' to him, so sorta weak an' helpless. But game as a young rooster, ain't he? I hate to see him shipped off to some poorhouse; an' seein's how he's fetched Mother Butts, I wondered if maybe she could take him on if I paid the tax."

"What did she say?"

"Sure. I'm payin' her good, an' nobody'll be the wiser."

"S'pose somebody does get curious?"

"Well, I can tell 'em right out, can't I? And if anybody wants to raise any dust, I can adopt him regular-like. I'd do it now, but it costs a lot o' lawyers and writin' and that kind o' stuff, and who else cares about the kid anyways?"

So "Pie Face" Hister hung around Mother Butts' hashhouse. Mother called him "Elmer," but Spike thought "Pie Face" was good enough

until he got big enough to get a name like "Spike."

Pie Face was generally on the kitchen floor playing in the scrub bucket or the potato sack, or else he was out in the yard with the chickens.

His wound healed up, and he got more tanned and sometimes even dirtier, but he filled out in the arms and legs, though it was slow business.

SPIKE and Pie Face got to be as thick as two fleas. Evenings the pair of them was a circus.

Spike would make faces—he could make 'em!—and wiggle his ears, and crawl on his hands and knees, and blow smoke out of his mouth and nose like a dragoon, he said; and Pie Face would laugh and make faces and pound the dragoon with his fists until it rolled over on the floor dead.

"Gonna be a real man when he grows up," Spike said. "But no rough customer like me. Gonna get a good schoolin'—right straight up as far as they go—an' he's gonna see somethin' o' this old world without bein' pushed by sheriffs and marshals and what not."

Spike had plans for making a hard-fighting, educated congressman out of Pie Face, and maybe a railroad president, or a big cattle or lumber king, or even President of the United States.

"Takes money, Spike, even to get a schoolin' these days."

"He don't have to worry about that, Joe," said Spike, giving me a queer wink. "I'm savin' for that a'ready."

I couldn't make that wink out for a while. I knew he couldn't be saving much, for his and the kid's keep took pretty near all his wages. I thought he winked just to show me he knew he was only day-dreaming; but one day when I caught sight of a roll of tens and twenties, I got suspicious with a jerk.

He caught my eye and winked again, though a little uncertain.

"Got these off a drummer for a bootleggin' firm last night jest as easy as buyin' a sack o' tobacker."

"Uh-huh," I mumbled.

After thinking it over a while, I thought I saw things his way. I figured his idea of things wasn't the same as other folks'. The dangerous part of crime was just spice for him, and as for the right-and-wrong part of it, I reckon his conscience was just a little more liberal than the rest of ours.

But I hated to see him slipping, even a little bit and in a good cause. Pie Face had showed him up for such a good-natured, overgrown kid that even the little bit of unsteadiness in his eye when he looked at me hurt.

ONE night, after Pie Face had cried because Spike didn't feel like playing with him, I got up nerve to say something of what I thought.

"Lay off it, Spike. Let the kid grow up as is. It ain't no disgrace to live an' die a cowhand or even a freight agent. You can't keep a good kid down, anyhow."

Spike's face was like a thundercloud, but it wasn't turned on me. He was glowering at the cracked mirror across the room.

"I don't like it either," he growled, "but he's gonna have a chance, to make up for the rotten one I got."

IT WAS the next day we came home together and hardly got in the door when somebody barked at us from behind and we saw two guns looking at us.

Back of them was the sheriff, a lean man with tobacco-juice whiskers, and another fellow I didn't know, but he had a badge under his coat and looked just as mean as the sheriff.

Spike's hands went up automatically. I'd never seen him so taken back

in my life. There was murder in his eye, and I half expected him to risk a draw and fight it out; but they'd been too slick for him. They took his gun and clicked handcuffs on his big wrists.

"Get the kid," growled the stranger to the sheriff.

"Kid!" broke in Spike, a funny tone in his voice. "What kid?"

Both officers snickered.

"What kid!" sneered the sheriff. "You know, all right. Slim Watkins put us wise to the kid Mother Butts' been keepin', an' Mother Butts ain't had a kid for 'leven year.

"An' ain't it strange that the same kind o' kid was rustled from Big Tim Wallace's place, and Big Tim was supposed to cough loose with—how much was it, Spike?—fifty thousand?"

There was a splash of amazement in Spike's face and he broke out into a long laugh that shook Mother Butts' shack till the windows rattled.

"Gents," he said, getting his breath, "you sure wasted two good reputations today. Don't you know, honest, that this kid is Mary Hister's, that Joe an' I found dead over in Scratch Valley? You know the time, Sheriff. Or do you fellers think you can frame me up for a reward?"

A shifty look came into their eyes, but they held their ground.

"You didn't tell me about no kid o' Mary Hister's."

"Aw, shucks, Sheriff! I liked the kid too well to turn it loose in a poorhouse. I——"

The stranger snorted.

"What's the use o' arguin'. It's the Wallace kid, even if it don't look a lot like the picture. But that was a long time ago!"

"Let's see the picture," asked Spike.

I LOOKED over his shoulder and almost broke out laughing. It was a picture of a baby in a fluffy white dress with patent leather shoes and its hair combed like a plaster doll. It had a snub nose something like Pie Face's—and every other kid's I'v ever seen—but I would have sworn it wasn't Pie Face even if I hadn't known just where Pie Face came from.

"You mean this is Big Tim Wallace's kid?" asked Spike. "Senator Tim Wallace, the millionaire rancher?"

The posse sniffed. It was.

"Well, gents," said Spike slowly, "I reckon the game's up. Let's get Pie Face and get him home. Don't bother about Joe here. He don't know nothin' about it."

"We'll take him along jest the same. He's a witness."

I saw Spike's game, of course, and it cut me right through. He wanted this wild little orphan of his to get a fine home with money and friends and the world to pick from, and he was willing to go up as a kidnaper to get it for him.

At first I thought he was just crazy. When the kid came to be identified his little scheme would blow up, and they might make trouble for him for trying to put something over.

There was a chance—a powerful slim one—that the Wallace folks wouldn't know their own kid. Seems as if theirs had been missing five months and was pretty much given up for dead.

A one-year-old will change a lot in that time in its own home and a lot more if it has to put up with kidnappers. Maybe Spike was figuring they'd figure that in, if he made an out-and-out confession.

WE WENT down to the city and "Big Tim" Wallace and his wife, in answer to a telegram, were waiting at the office of the chief of police.

The Senator was a fine-looking man as he stood there with his arm around the pale little woman that had gone through more than a mother that actually knows her kid is dead. When they first caught sight of Pie Face a startled look came over them, and the woman broke out crying.

"It's not my little Tim!" she wept. "It can't be! It can't be!"

"The man admits it, madam," explained the chief kindly.

"But is he—could he be mistaken?" asked "Big Tim," gulping.

"Hardly, Senator," replied the chief, shaking his head, "on a charge like this."

The mother looked around hysterically, as if she were trying to keep her eyes away from the child. Spike stood like a statue. The lines of his leathery face were hard of stone.

She stared at him a minute like a blind woman. Her lips moved.

"Is it?" she whispered. "Is it?"

Spike, the old-timer, the bad man, hard-boiled as they make 'em, looked at her with narrowed eyes and nodded like a man being tortured to say No.

The woman ran to the boy and hugged him to her breast as if he were her own. Spike winced: Pie Face was gone from him for good!

They jailed Spike and turned me loose on a promise, after I had admitted that Spike had brought the kid to Mother Butts and paid her to take care of it, but I couldn't remember how long ago that had been. Yes, he had seemed as if he didn't want the news spread around. Where did he get it? I couldn't exactly say.

I WENT around to the jail the next day to see Spike. He was more his own self.

"Put it over, eh, Joe? Think o' Pie Face growin' up as Big Tim's own son! The kid'll be a better man than old Tim himself!"

"Did the lawyer I called up get here?"

"Yeah," said Spike. "He's as slick as they make 'em. He ain't pretendin' to get me off, but he'll cut the sentence down if anybody can. Whatever it is, it's worth it for Pie Face, ain't it, Joe? Remember how he used to want the egg-beater all the time? Now, by golly, he can have pretty near anything on earth!"

Spike's eye was bright and I was surprised to see it change suddenly as he looked past me. He frowned and his mouth dropped open.

"If it ain't Pigger Morton!" he said in a low tone.

I turned and saw a skinny, moth-eaten individual with a twisted mouth and a sneaky eye. I'd heard a lot about Pigger and he fitted the picture.

He shot a glance up and down the corridor.

"Hey, Spike," he asked, almost in a whisper, "what you doin' with the Wallace kid?"

"Get wise, Pigger!" muttered Spike. "That ain't the Wallace kid."

"Ain't the Wallace kid!" gasped Pigger. "Who is it?"

"Nemmine! Jest a kid o' my own I'm workin' into somethin' soft. But keep it to yourself if you know what's good for you!"

"Don't fret! I ain't aimin' to hang myself!"

"Hang yourself?"

"God, Spike! It was me and Red River Schultze that sneaked the Wallace kid!"

"You! Where is it?"

"Croaked, I reckon."

"You reckon? Don't you know?"

"Well, no; not exactly. Y'see, when we tried to bleed these Wallace people, they bucked us an' we had to clear out a spell. We left the kid with a feller named Hister. Seems him and his woman both got bumped, an' I never did find out what happened to the kid."

The Man Who Shot Bill Powderly

By VICTOR LAURISTON

In this story of red-blooded pioneer days of the Western Frontier, Victor Lauriston tells the tale of a figure who arose from a position of scorn to one of heroic proportions. But always in the mind of Bon Luxton's friend there was an unanswered question to bother him. How this question is answered makes a story that carries conviction and will surprise the reader.

CHAPTER I

RADLEY'S QUESTION

BILL POWDERLY was dead thirty years, his grave thousands of miles distant, his very name long since forgotten, that October morning young Doctor Murchison argued with old Doctor Radley.

This Radley was a famous surgeon —famous even in New York; and young Murchison crawled on hands and knees to induce him to take a laparotomy.

Murchison felt that he understood Radley—his impetuous haste of temper, his hastily uncompromising "No," and the potential surrender behind it all.

"Don't waste my time," snapped the surgeon. "Get Costello, if you

can. No use talking. I say *No.* I don't care if there *are* unusual complications."

And urbane young Murchison placidly begged, coaxed, cajoled, pleaded, till Radley turned to his diary, with a dubious:

"Maybe, Murchison——"

Murchison, victorious, drew a long sigh; then, apropos of nothing:

"Did you see where Coolidge said——?"

With a snap Doctor Radley closed his diary.

"Murchison, if you insist on retailing political piffle——"

Murchison tactfully submerged himself in a newspaper. Radley reopened the diary. But presently the younger doctor bubbled again into words:

"Say, didn't you come from Minnehoma?"

"Uh-huh."

"Funny scrap, in the state elections. What d'you think of Luxton's chances for governor?"

Next instant, realizing his blunder, he bent his head to receive the torrent of objurgations. Doctor Radley hated the very name of politics.

Doctor Radley, though, voiced just one word:

"Luxton?"

Murchison plucked up courage.

"Former Governor Luxton! You know," scoffed Murchison, "every state has its Grand Old Man. Luxton seems to have been it in Minnehoma—some time before the Flood."

Silence lengthened. Radley was thinking hard—how hard the younger man could not imagine.

SO BON LUXTON still lived!

Murchison hid a grin. He had thought he knew Radley, his hot ebullitions of temper, his quickly dying resentments, his underlying sweet tenderness—but here were unplumbed depths.

"Here!" His finger indicated to Radley a newspaper editorial:

> "'Can Former Governor Bonnamy Luxton come back?' is today the question in Minnehoma.
>
> "In recent years the political atmosphere of Minnehoma has been like the state of Denmark in Hamlet's time. The spirit of the pioneers has yielded to the spirit of the profiteers.
>
> "But there are men in whom the spirit of the pioneers still lives, and these men in a crucial emergency have undertaken to clean up the festering rottenness.
>
> "They have turned for leadership to the man who in his younger days held the Minnehoma territory in the hollow of his hand; who, almost single-handed, made its wild, rough wastes safer than any American city; who led the fight for statehood; who became the first governor of the new state; who again and again was re-elected by overwhelming majorities. . . ."

"Seems to have been some punkins in his day," carelessly interpolated Murchison.

Doctor Radley spoke with a curious reverence:

"In Minnehoma they loved Bon Luxton as no other man ever was loved."

YET THIS man of impulsive words and few reticences did not tell Murchison how he, more than anyone else in Minnehoma, had loved Bon Luxton.

Years had passed since he heard from Luxton. Even Luxton's name, at one time outstanding in western politics, had long since vanished from the public eye, especially from the eye of Doctor James Radley, concerned with his surgical practice, intent on every new advancement in his chosen professional field, and deaf, dumb and blind to politics.

Here in New York, watching the friends of a newer generation pass one by one from his ken, vanishing outworks of his own life-citadel, Doctor Radley had come to think of Luxton as long since dead. In the rare moments when his mind recurred to

his younger days, it was to feel regret that never again would Luxton and he ride together across the purple wastes; and relief that he had forever escaped the asking of a question that had haunted him for thirty years.

"He'd be close to sixty!"

"Eh?" Murchison's thoughts had drifted back to the laparotomy. "Oh, this Luxton? It's a mistake, don't you think, for an old war horse to let himself be coaxed back into harness? The younger generation don't play his politics—they're trickier, less scrupulous. It invites an anti-climax of crushing defeat from a generation that's forgotten."

"You're right, Murchison. Wednesday, at 10 a. m."

Murchison eagerly agreed on details.

DOCTOR RADLEY, momentarily alone, thought not of the laparotomy, but of the Minnehoma elections. Bonnamy Luxton had been given a fine career. Why couldn't he rest content on his ancient laurels?

"For the same reason, I dare say," grimly mused Radley, "that, now I know he lives, I must ask him that question. Why did I ever give Bill Powderly's body a second glance? What is it to me how an infernal scoundrel died? I won't ask that question!"

He glared, he shouted, at unresponsive walls, "I won't! *I won't!*"

Thus he tried to flog it out of his mind. He leafed his diary. He noted petty tasks.

But always in his mind's eye he stood face to face with Bonnamy Luxton, tall and straight and strong, and asked the question that must forever end their friendship.

"He'll be beaten—his heart will break—punishment enough, that, for whatever lies in Bill Powderly's grave. Yes, punishment enough, then—I won't add to it——"

It awed him to think that all these years this anti-climax, this heartbreak, had waited inevitably for Luxton.

Waited inevitable, inescapable—fit mate for Radley's own trailing Nemesis with its insistence that the question he had so long carried in his mind must be asked by him and answered by Luxton.

CHAPTER II

MEMORIES

ON WEDNESDAY morning the critical operation was successfully over when Murchison bubbled into politics:

"D'you see what happened in Minnehoma?"

Radley, steel-nerved a moment ago when life hung on his skill, now found himself all a-tremble.

"Politics don't interest me," he grumbled.

Murchison jubilated:

"Routed—horse, foot and artillery! Overwhelmed! Wiped out!"

Radley's shoulders sagged. Oh, well, Luxton had found his own punishment. Yet an irresistible fascination drove him to open the morning paper.

"Oh!"

The younger doctor saw the thrill of relief, almost exultation.

The machine was routed—horse, foot and artillery; the corrupt politicians overwhelmed; the crooked ring wiped out.

In Minnehoma, it seemed, the Luxton tradition was still a living letter. Not merely the Minnehoma Valley and the foothills, but the entire state, had rallied overwhelmingly to the former governor.

A phrase leaped to Radley's lips from his long-dead youth:

"I will lift up mine eyes to the hills whence cometh my help."

That far-flung, sprawling state had lifted its eyes to the purple foothills —those foothills that seemed a cloudy fringe below the rainbow towers and minarets and battlements of the Sierras.

"Getting religion, eh?" scoffed Murchison.

His tinny, commonplace voice brought Radley down to earth from the Sierras of memory. He had been thinking of the Bonnamy Luxton he first knew, whimpering futile prayers—the later Bonnamy Luxton living a religion of grim achievement—and between the two that strange connecting link of a bullet that only a coward could have fired.

"What," he asked Murchison, "*is* religion?"

"After all," returned Murchison, unwontedly thoughtful, "what is religion except the individual search for truth?"

Radley wondered, had his religion all these years been his obsession for the truth behind that one unasked question—and had he evaded it?

TO HIS apartment window that night rose the clamor of New York. He gazed down a lighted canyon of brick and mortar; but what he saw was a shadowed abyss cut deep into a plateau.

The clatter of the elevated, the clamorous traffic on the pavement, the myriad mingled sounds of the seven millions bustling to and fro about their multifarious businesses, surged upward, but fell just short of him; for he dwelt in still silences.

In fancy he rode again with Bonnamy Luxton across far-reaching purple wastes under a blazing sun; helped him create law where none was; helped him set the roots of a human community in a far-flung wilderness; slept with him under sparkling stars; and at dawn, rolling out of his blankets, refreshed, gazed with him on the never-ceasing miracle of the purple gray expanse, the clouded foothills, and the rainbow mass of the Sierras kissed by the dawn.

Its wonder again enveloped him; its allure tugged at his heart-strings. These crowded, useful years seemed waste beside those other years he might have lived.

With puckered brow he tried to picture the Luxton he had first known.

MORE THAN thirty years ago it was. Pioneers were trickling into the Minnehoma territory. Law had halted hundreds of miles east of the foothills. The masked rider, Bill Powderly, dominated the scattered settlers by the sheer terror of his name.

The Luxton who first went into the Minnehoma Valley seemed now a hazy ghost, a vague, ill-defined shadow flitting on the edge of an open grave, a spectral presence. Reality was to come later.

Doctor Radley remembered, clear as yesterday, the day, the hour, the very moment Bonnamy Luxton, his great career still ahead of him, leaped into sudden fame as The Man Who Shot Bill Powderly.

CHAPTER III

RADLEY MAKES A DECISION

IT WAS a country of young men, that rough, uncouth, yet beautiful Minnehoma territory. Doctor Radley himself was twenty-three, just graduated, when Bill Martin's stage jolted him westward from the end of steel. Bonnamy Luxton might have been a year or two older.

And Bill Powderly, with all his stirring, cut-throat career as the last of the wild westerners in this last

surviving corner of the wild west, was, as his dead body showed, himself young.

Even when, twenty-five years ago, Radley himself came east, Minnehoma City was still a straggling western town on the ill-defined line between brown desert and purple foothills.

Vividly Doctor Radley recalled its wide streets, its frame shacks, its atmosphere of raw newness, its pride in Bonnamy Luxton.

It had been Minnehoma City's boast that when Luxton first ran for Governor, the whole town cast not a single vote against him!

Stray deviously as might Radley's thoughts, they always came back to that—the surpassing love of the Minnehoma pioneers for the man who shot Bill Powderly.

Yes, and to the wonderful, fascinating, really beautiful career of the man himself.

That one word described it—beautiful!

And he had not seen Luxton in twenty-five years.

THE OLD surgeon, till now engrossed in vivid pictures of twenty-five years ago, heard again the clamor of the elevated, the clatter of the pavements. He saw far below his apartment window the glare and glitter—and felt an insatiable hunger for the clear air and the rough simplicity of the Minnehoma country in those years the locust had eaten.

Impetuously he reached for the telephone:

"Costello? This is Radley. You've got to take my work for the next ten days—two weeks, maybe. Yes, on the next train. Of course it's sudden."

Sudden! Radley grimaced at the telephone. This had been coming twenty-five years! And that ass, Costello, called it *sudden*.

Radley frowned. Nostalgia had gripped him, but nostalgia walked hand-in-hand with Nemesis. Three days and a few hours hence he would again see Minnehoma, perhaps for the last time before he died.

He would seek out Bonnamy Luxton, the Man Who Shot Bill Powderly. Bonnamy Luxton, once his nearest and dearest friend on earth. And presuming on that ancient friendship, he would put into words for the first time the cruel question which had leaped to his lips thirty years before when, in front of Dorschinger's Saloon, he bent over Bill Powderly's dead body.

CHAPTER IV

RADLEY DEFIES BILL POWDERLY

IN HIS westward journey the gray-haired Doctor James Radley often lapsed in fancy into an eager young physician seeking his fortune in the newly opened Minnehoma territory of thirty years before.

Of the early stages of that first journey he recalled no clear-cut picture. Here and there vague glimpses—a prairie hamlet with its water-tower, its low-lying railroad buildings, its grain elevator, its one wide street, its frame shacks.

But the Minnehoma country had left a more lasting impress. A thrill came when he saw again the blur of gray-brown landscape, merging into distant purple and amethyst; and further on, in the morning light, the piled-up mass of opalescence that formed the Sierras.

Clearest in memory, though, stood the first effect of that new country on himself; the awe that came of its vastness; the sense of raw newness where man had touched and spoiled it, and of rare completeness where it still lay as God had left it.

WHERE was the end of steel in those days? This sprawling little town? Radley remembered his own eager interest in whether the railroad would ever go further; his diffident talk with others of the little group waiting for the stage.

"She'll be pushed through next summer, fellers," declared an optimistic newcomer. "I got a tip down east." To which a gaunt old-timer snorted: "If the Minnehoma Valley hears the toot of an enjine in fifty year, I'll eat the shirt offen my back."

"Nothing certain either way?" suggested Radley.

The grizzled old-timer, Lute Jackson, spat in the yellow dust.

"Only one thing sure certain in this here man's country, an' thet's Bill Powderly. T'other day he raided up to Callender——"

"Posse after him?"

Lute laughed sardonically.

"Yep—a long ways after."

Doctor Radley was interested. When later the stage jolted over the rough trail, he ventured a question:

"Who's this Bill Powderly?"

His question centred wondering eyes on him.

"Where d'you hail from, stranger, thet you ain't never heern tell o' Bill Powderly?"

"Is he a bad man? A bandit?"

"Nope. He's *the* bad man—*the* bandit."

"All the same," interjected a freckled young fellow, "Ben Dorschinger heard this morning as how the posse——"

The young wife of a mining prospector, coming out to join her husband, spoke nervously:

"You don't think"—she addressed freckled Sam Holt—"that Powderly will hold up the stage, mister?"

Holt spat nonchalantly.

"No, ma'am. Bill Powderly's hundreds of miles away in the foothills. Posse's still after him fer thet Callender raid. There's fifty riders between us an' Bill Powderly, every man o' them ready ter shoot on sight."

Gaunt Lute Jackson laughed harshly:

"They'll get him, too—just as they always do."

"Never you mind, Lute," snorted Sam Holt, "sooner er later, someone'll drop Bill Powderly in his tracks."

"Like they dropped Bill Dalton?" Radley was eager to show the others he knew something of the west.

Lute Jackson made an odd sound in his throat.

"Hunh! Bill Dalton, eh? Bill Dalton rode with a gang, hundreds of people knew his face, scores knew where he hung out. This here Powderly's diff'rent. He ain't got no pardner ter sell him out, even if this here Minnehoma country 'd pay any price. Ain't no friend ner enemy ter say, 'I seen that there face afore.'"

Radley grew suddenly acute:

"He rides masked? Alone?"

Freckled Holt piped up:

"There's a mighty good reason why Powderly rides masked."

"Hunh!" Lute's chin whisker bobbed. "I know what yer moozlin' over, young feller. Thet there old yarn 'bout Powderly bein' a woman. Well, ther ain't nothin' ter thet. Powderly's an Injun."

He went on to argue. "Don't he ride like an Injun? Don't he talk like an Injun? Don't he come an' go, an' dodge in an' out, like an Injun? Thet's why they ain't never goin' ter git Bill Powderly.

"He knows every inch o' ground 'twixt the end o' steel an' the Sierras—every rock, canyon, slough, waterhole an' patch o' chaparral. Right now they're huntin' him up north, back o' Callender. Well, t'morrer he'll bob up a hundred miles south o' Salinas.

"He's got his nerve with him, too.

'Member, Holt, thet there time you an' me rode posse with Sheriff Trerice, an' we cornered Powderly on the edge o' Dead Horse Canyon? Powderly, he seen us, so he jest kissed his hand an' dug his spurs into his hoss an' leaped him over the edge.

"We rid back to Minnehoma City. 'He's done fer,' Sheriff Trerice tells Ben Dorschinger. 'Bill Powderly's done fer.'

" 'So Bill Powderly's done fer,' says Ben Dorschinger. 'You blitherin' old fool, Bill Powderly this very mornin' held up the Salinas stage.'

"So we rode out agin, fast and furious, an' picked up his trail to the south an' rounded him up in the foothills. Well, he fought us off, an' broke through presently an' led us a wild goose chase an' then—zip!

"Where was Bill Powderly? Jest gone—thet's all. We hunted a hundred miles each way, an' then rode back into Salinas like a string of whipped pups."

RADLEY wasted no admiration on western bad men, even this last and greatest of the bad men; but he could quite fathom the logical explanation of Bill Powderly's vast repute.

Mystery magnified Powderly's figure; tradition added to his terrible fame; already fables grew up regarding him.

Every masked rider was Bill Powderly; every hold-up, every raid, every killing was Bill Powderly's.

Thus, while the stage halted to light the lamps, Radley mused; and mused, likewise, that Bill Powderly was mere human, and vulnerable.

"Well, anyway," piped Sam Holt, "I'll say this: Bill Powderly, he ain't never shot a man behind. It's allus a stand-up killin' with Bill Powderly."

Mere human, and vulnerable! So musing, Radley glanced across the stage, contemptuously, at the pale, hollow-cheeked tenderfoot who—all unknown to any there—was destined to wipe out Bill Powderly.

FROM the huge sombrero shadowing his face, past the flaunting red neckerchief and the too-new buckskins down to the woolly chaps, the fellow's outfit advertised him a callow easterner in the make-up of a stage cowboy.

That dude oufit submerged the youth's shadowy personality as his exaggerated sombrero painted out the pallid details of his characterless face.

Except his insistent, annoying cough. Nothing could submerge that. Luxton seemingly felt called to explain that cough. He whispered to the young woman next him.

Radley caught a few disjointed words — "consumptive — health — prospecting."

The woman shrank away; whereat the youth hid his face—what little of it the sombrero left visible—in his hands.

The young doctor should have been interested in a prospective patient; but the dude cowboy outfit merely excited his contempt. He was young; and in some aspects youth is pitiless.

The stage slowed.

"This here," explained Lute Jackson, "is Dead Man's Curve, where the Minnehoma trail starts to dip into the Valley. I say, Bill"—to the stage driver—"what's up?"

FOR THE stage, instead of picking up speed on the down grade, came to a jolting halt, the horses stamping, affrighted. In the darkness Radley heard confused voices; one voice, commandingly terse, dominated the others.

A lantern swayed outside. The stage driver and the outside passenger climbed down.

The door was flung open.

"All step down, please."

Then an awed whisper, punctuated by the woman's shriek:

"It's Bill Powderly!"

Radley was impetuously combative:

"Let's rush the fellow," he hotly urged.

He felt the chill of a death-stricken disapproval.

"No talk, there," commanded the business-like voice.

Powderly was mounted on his famous black horse. A black mask covered the upper part of his face; but Radley made out the firm lips and the strong chin.

"You, Bill," Powderly addressed the stage driver, "take up the collection. The lady first."

The woman, without a whimper, surrendered her small belongings. Radley, fuming under the menace of the blue steel, followed suit. Lute, grinning philosophically, came next.

All the time Powderly sat like a statue, while the passenger from the driver's seat with trembling fingers held the lantern.

Bill Martin turned to the dude westerner. The pallid youth with the sombrero whimpered some piteous, half-articulate prayer.

Impetuously disregarding the menacing revolver, Radley flung hot words at the masked rider:

"You coward, you'd rob a lunger who's come out here to die."

Next moment he trembled for the consequences. Silence hung tensely expectant. This Powderly had killed for less. Radley remembered that, now.

Powderly still sat, a dark statue silhouetted against the faint light. He grimly eyed the sombrero, the red neckerchief, the too-new buckskins, the woolly chaps. He could not see the face, in shadow.

"Stand aside!"

While Radley still stood dazed at his own escape, the search was done; and the galloping hoof-beats of the black horse receded down the trail.

"Young feller," muttered gaunt Lute Jackson, "you sure missed kingdom-come by a hair's breadth."

Radley knew it. His knees wobbled. He tried to speak, and found his tongue paralyzed.

He climbed shakily into the stage and, as it jolted disconsolately on, sat hunched in a corner. His fellow-passengers were violently vocal.

Reminiscence, speculation, recrimination, were bandied back and forth, and virulent abuse was flung up at the unprotesting stage driver.

Bill Martin at last burst forth:

"See here, thet there young sawbones thet's sittin' in thet there corner an' ain't sayin' nothin' kin say what he pleases ter me. The rest o' yer, shut yer infernal yaps. I didn't see none of yer takin' no chances with Bill Powderly."

CHAPTER V

LUXTON HAS HIS SAY

SO RADLEY got down at Minnehoma City; and shadowy Luxton, his exaggerated sombrero pulled down over his forehead, rattled and jolted on to Landis, the jumping-off place, like a vague shadow going to rejoin the outer darkness.

Radley felt momentarily hurt that, having saved the dude cowboy's money at the risk of his life, the pallid youth voiced not one word of thanks but passed out of the picture without even a parting handshake.

Then he forgot the fellow completely in the thrill of active work in new and strange surroundings.

The stage hold-up receded into a dream—till the day Bill Powderly rode into Minnehoma City in broad daylight and stuck up the First National Bank.

The straggly prairie town seethed

with helpless fury; yet more helpless when, days later, the pursuing posse came back empty-handed.

Radley was secretary of a mass meeting held that night in the big ball-room over Dorschinger's saloon. Between drinks there was bold talk; but all hearts were oppressed with the futility of trying to kill the daring, elusive, invulnerable Bill Powderly.

"He's like a flea," grumbled Lute Jackson. "When you git him cornered, he jest ain't there. The corral ain't built thet'll hold Bill Powderly; the rope ain't made thet'll hang him; an' afore you drop him in his tracks, the devil's got to bless yer bullet."

From time to time Radley heard from the shadowy rear of the ill-lit ball-room a racking cough. Presently came a whispery voice:

"Men—no man's so slick—he can dodge death—forever."

"Platform!" bellowed Dorschinger; but the cry, though taken up, was futile.

Peering eyes discerned a slim stranger, a sombrero drooping over his half-averted face, about his throat a loose neckerchief that might be red—but no one knew him.

"Who in hell are you?" snarled Dorschinger.

"You don't know me," wheezed the youth. "I come over from Landis. My name's Bonnamy Luxton."

"Well, Mister Bonnamy Luxton, w'at yer goin' ter do? Hey?"

"I'll do this," panted Luxton. "If you'll stake me to a rifle and a horse, I'll go out after Bill Powderly. It may take days, it may take weeks, but I'll get him."

"Alone?" gasped a dozen voices.

"Alone."

What prodigious folly it all was! Yet Dorschinger, half-drunk, contemptuously handed Luxton a loaded rifle and a belt of cartridges. Lute Jackson found him a horse. In a half hour he was provided with food and everything he needed for the trail.

It was a good joke, this tenderfoot with his stage cowboy outfit thinking he could get Bill Powderly. Under the stars he rode away into the foothills.

"The coyotes will be pickin' his bones," muttered Sam Holt, "an' they'll be poor pickin'."

From the purple foothills, day after day, came no sound; and night after night only the howling of the coyotes.

THREE weeks later Radley, in his shack of an office, was compounding a prescription. A clamor from the street brought him to the door.

A haggard shadow of a man, bearded, uncouth, with a face like death, came riding down the wide main street. At first Radley did not know him. No one knew him.

Sombrero scarred, bright neckerchief torn, buckskins dirty, once woolly chaps frayed, pallid face tanned to an almost Indian bronze, where the beard did not hide it.

He halted in front of Dorschinger's saloon. He led a black horse, and the black horse carried a burden curiously trussed.

This ghost of a man slipped to his feet rather than dismounted, tottered half-way to the saloon, and collapsed in a heap.

"Hurry, doc!" shouted someone; but Radley was at the man's side.

"Boys," whispered the ghost of a man, just before he fainted dead away, "I got him for you. *I got Bill Powderly.*"

CHAPTER VI

BONNAMY LUXTON'S FAME

WHEN young Doctor Radley had seen Luxton comfortable, he returned to the dead Powderly. The bandit's body carried two bullet wounds. Both were in front.

So Powderly's career had ended in a stand-up fight? The shot through the side must ultimately have killed the man, let alone that second, ghastly wound in the face.

What else Doctor Radley saw he kept to himself—as he then thought, till Luxton could tell his story; but, as the issue proved, for thirty years.

Bonnamy Luxton, tossing in delirium, for weeks knew nothing of his new-found fame. A bullet had dented his skull, and he must besides have suffered incredible hardships.

Out of Doctor Radley's labors over him sprang their friendship. Luxton, once on his feet, gained rapidly.

The weeks in the open, the long chase after Powderly, the bitter hardships, had purged him of disease.

AND ANOTHER thing Radley comprehended with amazement. Bonnamy Luxton had found himself. Despite himself, he had begun a new career.

Where he had been a whimpering, self-condemned coward, now Minnehoma respected him, and he could respect himself, as the man who had achieved a task all Minnehoma had thought impossible.

He was marked for great things thenceforth. The man who could draw quicker than the notorious Bill Powderly and shoot straighter, in that last bit of the western frontier and in those rough days, needed no other title to fame.

He was acclaimed marshal of Minnehoma county, a vague, far-reaching jurisdiction; and in six months law and order rested on a foundation solid as Plymouth Rock.

Then came the oil discoveries, making Minnehoma populous and Bonnamy Luxton wealthy; and the agitation for statehood, in which he led; and the governorship, thrice repeated.

The first thing Luxton did after his recovery was to telegraph his aged mother in Vermont. He did not go east to see her, however, till after his first election as governor.

She was an old women then, blind, poor, but she clung with down-east tenacity to her cottage and her rocky bit of hillside.

"She shall never want and never worry," declared her son.

The papers, Radley remembered, had featured the pathetic story. Radley wondered if the woman still lived, after all these years.

And would her son go to her and tell her that Minnehoma had called him from the quiet of his ranch to do battle against criminals meaner and less courageous yet harder to cope with than the masked rider who had thrown his mantle of terror over desert and foothills in the old lawless days?

CHAPTER VII

THE QUESTION IS ASKED

MINNEHOMA CITY in 1925 pulsed with busy life.

"All changed—changed!" mused Doctor James Radley.

Traffic crowded the smooth asphalt of Main Street. The whir and clang of the unfamiliar trolley disconcerted him.

"Dorschinger's saloon must have been here," he muttered, and gazed up at the precipitous face of an oil company's skyscraper office-building.

"Thirty years ago, unpainted boards and corrugated iron—now brick and mortar!"

He felt a youth-nostalgia for the old days, for whooping cowboys, clatter of hoofs, the smell of yellow dust churned up.

"Was it here Bon Luxton tumbled in the road?" he asked himself, pacing up and down. And then:

"All changed—all changed!"

HE EXPERIENCED the queer, crazy thought that it was time to be gone from this bright, busy Minnehoma City of 1925, and back to his shabby frame office in the western hamlet of thirty years ago.

"Can't neglect my patients—Dorschinger'll be getting the D. T.'s again——"

Then he remembered Dorschinger was dead these fifteen years or more. Sam Holt gone. Old Lute Jackson dead. And the very places that had known them vanished, too, like words writ in water.

For days he vainly sought familiar landmarks. He found such only at dawn, when from the western window of his hotel he gazed on the piled-up opalescence of the Sierras; or at dusk when, from the same eyrie, he saw, stretching into bewildering distance, the purple and amethyst of Minnehoma Valley and the surrounding foothills where the black-hearted Bill Powderly had lived and died.

"No hurry—Luxton will be too busy—oh, you liar, trying to deceive yourself—thirty years—why ask him, anyway?"

He saw the opalescence of a third dawn, and girded up his courage to face the governor.

HE WENT up to the executive mansion with head bowed and sagging shoulders. In the antechamber he had to wait.

He watched the diminishing line, now with fear lest he be turned away, again with hope that his turn would not be reached.

He hungered for the handclasp of Bonnamy Luxton; he dreaded the asking of that haunting question.

"Why trouble yourself how Bill Powderly died?" he fiercely interrogated himself, and in that moment a clerk tapped his shoulder.

Across a flat-topped desk he faced a hale man in the latter fifties, stalwart, lithe, hardly gray, hardly wrinkled.

Anywhere he would have known this Bonnamy Luxton; yet he himself stood waiting many moments.

"Have I aged that much?" he asked himself, while the silence grew strained.

Luxton at last exclaimed:

"It's Radley?"

He gripped hands across the desk.

"You've waited an hour? Why didn't you send in your name? Remember, for the rest of your visit, you're *my* guest."

Radley, unable to meet the clear gaze, mumbled that he must hurry back to New York.

"We'll visit first," decided Bonnamy Luxton.

Radley hardly knew with what questions Bonnamy Luxton showered him, or what answers he gave. But presently he found courage for a jest:

"The years haven't changed you, Bon. Nor," in a voice suddenly choked, "the feeling toward you. I suppose, fifty years hence, whoever's running, people will still vote for Governor Luxton."

Luxton was oddly silent. The old surgeon was conscious, as often in his younger days, of some mysterious reserve of power in this man.

He wondered, remembering the pallid youth, slinking through Minnehoma City like a vagrant ghost, playing solitaire in a neglected shack, shunned by his fellow men, shunning them.

Luxton spoke:

"You've hardly come all this distance merely to shake hands. Tell me, how can I help you with your business here?"

So he heaped coals of fire on the gray head of this man who had come thousands of miles to cruelly question him.

In a muffled voice Radley found himself answering:

"I—I have business—with you."

"With me?"

The governor showed faint surprise; then waited.

RADLEY breathed hard. Oh, it had to be said at last, what he had all these years put off saying.

"Concerning Bill Powderly—the bandit—thirty years ago.

"After you rode in with Bill Powderly's body you collapsed—delirious for days. I attended you. Of course there was no inquest—I—sort of unofficial autopsy—examined the wounds, you know—the bullets."

"You have them?" challenged Luxton.

Doctor Radley produced two bullets from his watch pocket. These he laid side by side on the governor's desk.

"That rifle bullet came from the wound in Powderly's side—the revolver bullet from the wound in his head. A question has haunted me thirty years, Bon. I must know. Your fight with Bill Powderly was a running fight. How many days?"

Luxton, erect, unemotional, countered:

"*Days?* Why days?"

"The wound in Powderly's side—from the rifle—your weapon—had time to suppurate before Powderly died. The second wound—it killed Powderly instantly—a fresh wound—from a revolver. When you left Minnehoma City, you had no revolver."

The governor's aristocratic lips twitched slightly.

"The rifle shot," pursued Radley, "was fired from a distance—the other was close.

"Powderly"—he hesitated—"Powderly must have fallen forward into his campfire. The coals burned his face yet, despite that, I found faint blue marks where the powder burned his skin.

"It was enough for everyone that both wounds were in front, and—in Bill Powderly. Enough for everyone——"

"But you?"

DOGGED persistence in voicing his thoughts gave Radley courage; he now looked the governor in the eyes.

"That first wound had been washed and bandaged—a botch job, indicating Powderly was too weak to do it properly, or else did it hurriedly. He was dying when you fired that second shot and—listen, Bon——"

Luxton's fingers drummed a moment on the desk.

"Odd, that second wound. You remember, Bon?"

He would force Luxton to help him.

"I remember. The bullet entered at the mouth, and struck upward. That's what you couldn't explain, Radley?"

"No. God help me, Bon, it was only too plain. One of two things had happened. Either you lay on the ground and fired up at Powderly, or he lay on the ground, dying, and you knelt above him and shot him. And, according to my code, that was trickery—no stand-up fight, as all Minnehoma imagined, but sheer murder.

"It haunted me when I rode with you, and loved you, Bon; it drove me back east rather than question you and face the truth—and now it's brought me here.

"Powderly," he finished, with seeming irrelevance, "once, at least, showed you a trace of kindness."

"You mean, in that stage hold-up? That," said Luxton, oddly, "brought about Bill Powderly's finish."

Radley shivered. Till this moment he had thought Luxton's going on Powderly's trail mere reckless impulse.

"The Luxton I came to know," he muttered, protesting, "was resolute, but not vindictive; wary, but no coward. To shoot a dying man——"

Steadily Governor Luxton regarded him.

"Yet a bullet might be mercy compared with Powderly's fate if I brought him back, alive, to Minnehoma City?"

That new thought left Radley momentarily nonplussed. Luxton went on:

"You shall have the whole story of The Man Who Shot Bill Powderly."

He went to the safe, and presently brought out a few sheets of paper. The creases were a bit yellow; dust clung to them; Radley fancied a mouldy smell that suggested a grave —the grave in which Bill Powderly had lain these thirty years.

"Twenty-five years ago," said Luxton, "I felt you had that question in your mind. So I wrote down the details while they were fresh in my recollection. I meant this letter to wait for me to finish my work and to die."

Radley, carefully unfolding the yellowed sheets, recognized Bonnamy Luxton's handwriting.

CHAPTER VIII

LUXTON'S STORY

THE narrative opened abruptly. It was curiously impersonal:

In his pursuit of Bill Powderly, Bonnamy Luxton worked under handicaps. He was ill; unfitted for the trail; a poor rider; an indifferent shot.

Powderly had fled into a vast expanse of foothill country with abundant cover for a fugitive. He knew every inch of this ground.

Luxton was entirely unfamiliar with it. Nor was Luxton trained to pick up and follow the slight trail left by the fugitive.

Thus Luxton for ten days blundered through the foothills. It was largely through Powderly's own negligence that Luxton at last stumbled on him.

The bandit had, it seems, chanced on Luxton's trail, recognized the marks of a tenderfoot, and was curious to know what this stranger was doing in the foothills. The thought of being pursued by a lone man seemingly did not occur to him.

It was merest chance that at the last Luxton saw Powderly before the bandit got sight of him. Toward sundown Powderly, unsuspicious of pursuit, made camp near a spring.

Luxton, coming up on the opposite side of a deep gully, discerned the smoke of a campfire. He crept to the edge of the gully and fired at the bandit twice.

The first shot went high, but at the second Powderly fell, or threw himself down.

Luxton, uncertain whether Powderly was dead, unconscious or merely shamming, considered what to do. To follow the trail to where the gully could be easily crossed meant a long detour.

Luxton decided therefore to leave his horse and descend the steep gully on foot, carrying his rifle. In the growing darkness he missed his footing, and tumbled about thirty feet; the rifle was accidentally discharged, wounding him.

He lay at the bottom of the gully, conscious but seriously wounded, where Powderly found him some time later.

Doctor Radley, halting, gazed queerly at Bonnamy Luxton. The governor merely nodded.

POWDERLY, though himself wounded, dragged the injured Luxton to his camp beside the spring, where he bathed the wound and tried to make Luxton comfortable.

In the morning Luxton was too badly hurt to be moved. Besides the

gunshot wound, the fall had injured him.

He was, however, conscious; and the two men, thus strangely thrown together, talked to one another at intervals throughout the day.

"Why," demanded Powderly, "did *you* come after me—you, the one man in the Minnehoma country I never hurt?"

"That," said Luxton, "is why. You let me have my chance. That night you held up the stage I told myself 'A man with this much kindness can't be all bad.' I've come out here to ask you to quit."

"And," grumbled Powderly, "as a preliminary, you shot me when I wasn't looking? Out of pure gratitude, eh? I'm not objecting to dying with my boots on, but you might give me a hail."

Luxton went on to talk about himself, telling Powderly that his parents down east, losing all their other children, had pinned their last hopes on him, the youngest.

They had spoiled him. With good impulses and high ambitions, he was nevertheless weak.

Then he took consumption and his mother—the father was then dead—scraped together a few hundred dollars and sent him out to Minnehoma to die.

Powderly listened to his confidences, but did not reciprocate. Nevertheless, his caution was somewhat disarmed.

"I ought to shoot you dead," he told Luxton, "but somehow, I just can't do it. I've never yet shot a man that couldn't stand up to me with a gun in his hand. And you're not fit to be left alone—that's plain."

After another day, Luxton showed no sign of improvement. Powderly himself was weak from his wound, and in bad shape.

Doctor Radley paused.

"A deep game?" he mused, aloud. "Winning the poor devil's confidence—lulling his suspicions to sleep. Luxton, it wasn't like you!"

"No?" questioned Luxton.

The old doctor resumed his reading.

THE SECOND day, as Luxton seemed no better, Powderly spoke of riding down to Minnehoma City for a doctor—*the* doctor. Luxton dissuaded him.

"I'll be all right in the morning," he declared.

He spent much of the day in delirium; and in his conscious moments talked of his aged mother in Vermont.

"I'll go back to her the minute I'm clear of this," he told Powderly.

DOCTOR RADLEY, tensely clutching the yellowed paper, could visualize the two. For all his malingering, Luxton, the acme of grim ruthlessness, had from that night of the stage hold-up deliberately schemed to "get" Bill Powderly.

Before his tenacity thus pictured, Radley stood awed. The long pursuit through the trackless foothills, the wariness that enabled Luxton to get the drop on the watchful Powderly, and the ill luck that incapacitated Luxton at the critical moment.

And the shrewd presence of mind that led Luxton, when he lay in Powderly's camp at Powderly's mercy, to feign delirium, to lull the man's suspicions and win his confidence, while every moment he watched and waited his chance.

Grim, relentless, pitiless, forgetful of Powderly's mercy that bygone night of the stage hold-up, ungrateful for Powderly's rough kindness now.

Radley shuddered with repulsion. Had Bill Powderly, with all his crimes, been the better man?

The pitiless narrative went on:

NEXT morning Luxton was no longer delirious, but seemingly much weaker. He could not feed himself; so Powderly fed him, and brought him a drink from the spring.

THAT brief passage cut Radley like the lash of a whip, like the stab of a sharp knife to the heart. He could see it.

Dawn on the rainbow masses of the Sierras, the purple foothills all about, the campfire sending up its wisp of smoke, the bacon sizzling in the skillet, the terrible Powderly holding a tin cup of water to the parched lips of this relentless enemy.

This Radley, in fancy, saw. But all pitiless Bonnamy Luxton had seen was two men face to face, two antagonists, one of whom must die. And he, blind to the beauty of the dawn, to the more wonderful beauty of Powderly's rough kindness, relentlessly waiting for the moment to kill.

"CAN'T you see, Bill Powderly," muttered Bonnamy Luxton, "it's you or me?"

"Sh!" soothed Bill Powderly, thinking him delirious. "Wait, pardner, till you're able to stand up. Then I'd admire to have you plug me, if you can. Right now, I'm riding down to Minnehoma City for that doctor."

Said Luxton:

"You forget. You'll be shot on sight."

Bill Powderly laughed.

"I'll take my chance. I've always ridden masked, and alone. No one knows my face, for certain. That doctor you spoke of——"

"Doctor Radley."

"Oh," said Powderly, "the hot-headed young saw-bones who bawled me out that night I stuck up the stage?"

"Yes."

"I'll ride down and get him."

Luxton still argued:

"I can just see what will happen. I'll die before you can get back with the doctor. You won't come back, anyway. You see it, Bill Powderly—your chance. You'll grab it.

"Down there, I've slunk in shadows. They hardly know my face. They don't know yours. I'll die up here, and—you'll tell them you saw Bill Powderly dead in the hills.

"Bill Powderly, my mother's old and blind, but she's waiting for me to do great things in life, and to come back strong and ask for her last blessing before she dies."

Powderly grinned.

"You suspicious son-of-a-gun—you'll go back to your mother, never fear! Bill Powderly's coming back here with the saw-bones. A scoundrel, Bill Powderly, but he keeps his word.

"My luck won't fail me. If anyone shoots, he'll miss. Or, with that rifle I'll get the drop and—no, I won't kill. I'll tell where to find you, and vamoose.

"Now," resolutely silencing Luxton's protests, "I'm boss here. I've said what's to be done. What the devil can you do to change it? Eh?"

Said Luxton in a muffled tone:

"Nothing."

He narrowly watched Powderly.

"You've taken my rifle," he weakly added. "Then won't you leave me the revolver? I'm afraid of coyotes."

Powderly handed him the revolver, and, quite easy in his mind, went down toward the spring where the horse was tethered.

His talk may have been all bluff, to ease Luxton's apparent anxiety; in whatever spirit of quixotic generosity he meant, if he could, to save Luxton.

He had almost reached the spring when Luxton called to him. Powderly turned back at a run. A moment later a shot rang out."

CHAPTER IX

THE MAN WHO SHOT BILL POWDERLY

DOCTOR RADLEY crumpled the paper. So that explained the second shot, fired from the ground, striking upward from mouth to brain.

"In cold blood," he gasped, "you called him back, man, and shot him? Eh? Did I call you *man?* You—*coward.*"

"Read—*that.*" Luxton indicated a crumpled sheet of paper pinned to the narrative—another handwriting.

"It's the only way you've left me. Bill Powderly dead—Bonnamy Luxton goes on living. For the sake of the Minnehoma country—for the sake of my old mother who watches and waits and prays—for your own sake—for the love of God."

The scrawl ended abruptly. The narrative had one more paragraph:

"When Powderly reached the spot, Bonnamy Luxton was dead. He had pulled himself to his knees so that, when he shot himself through the head with Powderly's revolver, he fell with his face in the embers of the campfire."

"THAT answers your question?" asked the governor.

"Yes," said Doctor Radley, slowly, "it answers many questions."

"Well, can you answer mine? The question *I* have asked endlessly. What is the right thing for me to do?

"Shall I tell the truth and break the heart of that old woman in Vermont who takes pride in the achievements of her son?

"Shall I betray my tacit promise to the man who, in the Minnehoma foothills, shot himself, for his mother's sake and mine—to give me all he had?

"Shall the career of Bonnamy Luxton falter at the moment above all moments when Bonnamy Luxton is needed by the country Bill Powderly terrorized—to fight men worse than Bill Powderly ever was?

"Or," his voice grew oddly pensive, "shall I go down to my grave living a lie that grows constantly more and more hideous to me—hiding the one fact that even the people who love me most could not forgive—that the man Minnehoma loves best—their Man Who Shot Bill Powderly—is Bill Powderly himself?"

Stonehenge

The picture on the cover,

THE STONEHENGE stands on Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire, England. It is thought to be the seat of the old Druidic religion in ancient Britain and, from markings on the stones, archeologists believe it was built about seventeen centuries before Christ.

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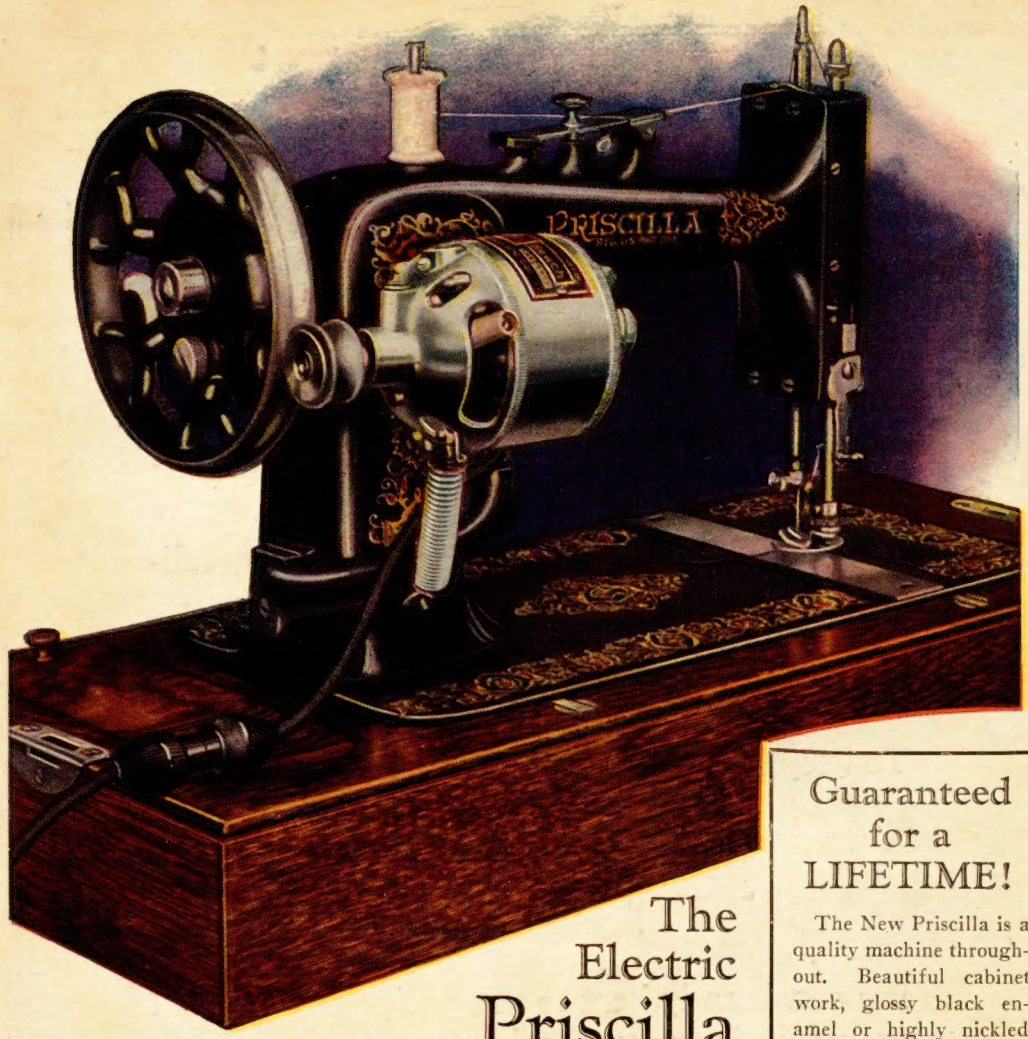

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